SUICIDE AND AGENCY

Studies in Death, Materiality and the Origin of Time

Series Editors: Dorthe Refslund Christensen and Rane Willerslev,
Aarhus University, Denmark

Eventually we all die – and we experience death head-on, when someone close to us dies. This series, *Studies in Death, Materiality and the Origin of Time*, identifies this fact as constitutive of the origin of human conceptions of time. Time permeates everything, but except for time itself all things are perishable – yet, it is only through the perishable world of things and bodies that we sense time. Bringing together scholarly work across a range of disciplines, the series explores the fact that human experiences and conceptions of time inherently hinge on the material world, and that time as a socially experienced phenomenon cannot be understood as separate from material form or expression. As such, it departs from a persistent current within Western thinking. Philosophy, biology and physics, among other disciplines, have studied time as an essential, ethereal and abstract concept. In the same way, death has often been conceived of in abstract and sometimes transcendental terms as occupying one extreme margin of human life. As an alternative, this series examines the ways in which bodily death and material decay are central points of reference in social life, which offer key insights into human perceptions of time.

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Suicide and Agency

Anthropological Perspectives on Self-Destruction, Personhood, and Power

Edited by

LUDEK BROZ
and
DANIEL MÜNSTER

ASHGATE

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When we first started talking about our common interest in the anthropology of suicide, we were both living and working in Halle (Saale), Ludek Broz as a postdoctoral researcher at the Siberian Studies Center, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and Daniel Münster as a lecturer at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology at Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg. We are grateful to our colleagues at both these institutions for the stimulating intellectual environment. Since then, we continued to experience full support for this project at our new institutional bases: Ludek Broz at the Czech Academy of Sciences and Charles University Prague with the support of the Czech Science Foundation (grant no. 13-06860P); Daniel Münster at the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context" at Heidelberg University, with a Junior Research Group "Agrarian Alternatives" funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

We have contributed equally to the editing of the book as a whole as well as to the writing of the introduction. The decision to put Broz's name as first editor of the volume and Münster's as first author of the introduction was arbitrary.

PART I
Introduction

Chapter 1
The Anthropology of Suicide: Ethnography and the Tension of Agency

Daniel Münster and Ludek Broz[1]

"Everyone dies …
Very few people kill themselves"
Emile Durkheim 1952: 267

Suicide is a challenging object of study. As Ian Hacking has recently claimed, "[t]he meanings of suicide itself are so protean across time and space that it is not so clear that there is one thing, suicide" (2008: 1). For anthropology, the particular challenge lies in thinking beyond some of the assumptions implicit in the powerful and widespread clinical conceptualization of suicide, which presents it as a pathological and individual act, committed with willful intent, full consciousness and unambiguous authorship, whose default subject is arguably a "Western," male, white, middle-class human. These implicit assumptions serve as a "gold standard" of real suicide, to which all acts of self-harm are compared or ultimately attributed. In this volume, however, we aim at abandoning such assumptions in favor of non-European experiences of self-harm in order to re-examine critically the Western tradition of thinking about suicide.

The ethnographies assembled in this volume engage with cultural practices of making sense of suicide, and in particular with the multitude of questions and answers about agency, personhood, and death that circulate within specific vernacular and expert regimes of knowledge around the issue of suicide. When families, neighbors, religious specialists, doctors, public health experts, activists, and newsmakers speculate about possible motives and reasons behind suicides, they operate with assumptions about free will, suffering, authorship, power and personhood and about "the very quality of life experienced by someone who chooses to die" (Marks 2003: 308). By recording and analyzing ethnographic instances of such sense-making, this volume seeks to highlight the ambivalent

1 The introduction has benefitted from insightful comments, suggestions, and criticisms by many people. We are particularly grateful to Katrina Jaworski and Jocelyn Chua for their critical readings of earlier drafts. Both editors have contributed equally to the writing of the introduction as well as to the editing of the book as a whole. The decision to put Broz's name as first editor of the volume and Münster's as first author of the introduction was arbitrary.

position of agency in contemporary understandings of suicide. The focus is on rationalizations of suicide events—popular, expert and scientific—and how they articulate situated ideas about human personhood, the morality of death, and the human capacity to voice dissent and act politically through self-inflicted death.

In this opening chapter we develop our argument about the centrality of agency, personhood, and power for the anthropology of suicide by dealing first with the core premises of what we like to call the "mainstream" of suicide studies and the counter-hegemonic potential of the ethnographic approach. Second, we elaborate on what we identify as the central *tension of agency* in suicide by focusing on both scientific epistemologies and vernacular understandings of the phenomenon as manifested in the ethnographic record. Third, we discuss the challenge that the anthropological work on personhood poses for the Western Self implicit in suicide studies. Finally, we connect agency in suicide to the question of "power" by focusing, on the one hand, on ideas about the human capacity to performatively express dissent and to act politically through self-inflicted death and, on the other hand, on the diagnostic potential of suicide ethnography for the study of structural violence.

* * *

For numerous thinkers throughout history (notably philosophers), suicide has pointed to central questions about the human condition. As the existential philosopher Albert Camus claimed famously, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (1955: 3). Building on the centrality of suicide for Camus, anthropologists James Staples and Tom Widger argue that "[q]uestions of existence, survival, and coping …, whether one agrees with Camus or not, are surely crucial for human beings everywhere, and go straight to the centre of anthropological enquiry" (Staples and Widger 2012: 185). Yet the potential significance of suicide for ethnographic understandings of the human condition stands in stark contrast to the relative silence on the subject within social and cultural anthropology as academic disciplines. In fact, anthropology has been a latecomer to the systematic study of suicide, leaving as yet little trace in suicide studies (for a review of some recent anthropological contributions, see Macdonald 2007; Staples and Widger 2012).

We argue that the reasons for the reluctance of social and cultural anthropology to afford greater attention to suicide are to be found in the epistemological and methodological challenge of studying suicide ethnographically. Anthropology has historically aimed at generalizing cultural forms (e.g. norms, types, structures, patterns) uncovered through long-term ethnographic engagements with everyday life contexts, thus focusing on regular and quotidian rather than the exceptional and contingent. However, in the context of a particular locality, suicides are contingent phenomena whose occurrence cannot be foreseen as only rarely do individuals actively and successfully seek to end their own lives. The average Suicide Mortality Rate (SMR) for "Western" countries suggests that for every

ten persons who commit suicide in any given year, nearly a hundred thousand do not.[2] And yet, despite—or because of—the exceptionality of suicide (Morrissey 2006: 1) that has largely prevented anthropology from a substantial ethnographic contribution to its study, there seems to be an impulse, among both researchers and the population at large, to make sense of suicide cases in relation to extrapersonal issues. Regardless of the statistical odds, most human societies tend to treat suicides not as idiosyncratic and exceptional ways of dying but as a kind of death indicative of larger, more significant issues, such as ruptures in social, economic, and moral life.

Suicidology has addressed the problem of exceptionality in two ways. One approach involves the use of what Nicolas Rose calls "psy knowledge, techniques, explanations, and experts" (2006: 12). Psy stands for "the psychosciences and disciplines psychology, psychiatry, and their cognates" (Rose 1998: 3), fields that have contributed to the medicalization and pathologization of suicide since the nineteenth century. From this perspective cases of suicide become integrated into a clinical picture and, in Ian Marsh's words, a "compulsory ontology of pathology" (Marsh 2010: 31). The second approach deals with the exceptionality of suicide through quantitative regimes of representation (cf. Hacking 1990). The disciplines that rely on statistical aggregation of large population numbers in the form of suicide rates (e.g. sociology, criminology, demography, and public health) also grew in the nineteenth century, this time out of the field of moral statistics which dealt with deviance and social problems. Both of these epistemic clusters offer particular solutions to the methodological problem of the rarity of suicide and provide implicit clues in the search for meaning in suicide: medicalization has rationalized suicide in terms of pathology, while quantification has demonstrated statistical correlations between suicide and other (national) indicators of health and well-being of populations.

These expert knowledge regimes on suicide entail a logical tension which we refer to as the tension of agency: the dialectic of agency and patiency. On the one hand, they build on a specific Western notion of agency and subjectivity by defining the object of study—suicide—as intentional, agentive action. This intentionality distinguishes suicide sharply from "normal ways of dying." On the other hand, these knowledge regimes partly deny agency (as free will) to the suicidal person by invoking allegedly universal causes that are beyond the individual's (conscious) control and possibly outside of their personhood altogether, such as depression, serotonin levels, gender, genetics, sexual orientation, or financial crises. This tension of agency, the simultaneous reliance on and denial of agency, sometimes comes with a dismissal of situated political and cultural meanings of self-destructive acts in suicidology.

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2 See World Health Organization for national rates of suicide mortality (based on successful suicides per 100,000 persons per year) (http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide_rates/en/index.html, accessed 12 November 2013).

The tension of agency is not only built into medical and sociological suicidology but is also implicit in most vernacular discourses about suicide. The tension, the necessity and denial of agency, seems to us to be connected to the very widespread classification of suicides as a "bad death" (Seale and van der Geest 2004). Suicide, Parry and Bloch argue, is the "supreme example of bad death": the self-destruction of a person "is regarded with such incomparable horror" in many cultures because their "soul may forever be excluded from the society of the dead and must wander the earth as a lonely and malignant ghost, while the corpse may not be accorded the normal rites of disposal …" (Bloch and Parry 1982: 16). The abnormality of and moral outrage surrounding suicide in turn require a clear ruling as to whether a particular case of death must be regarded as a suicide as opposed to a normal or "good" death. What makes most suicides "bad" deaths seems to be the agentive decision to end one's life, that is the will to die, or the act of giving in to the "death wish" as Freudians would call it (see Menninger 1938). In other words, there is no suicide without agency, or to be more precise, there is no suicide without intentionality. Almost universally—and across the registers of vernacular and expert knowledge —agency appears to be a fundamental component of suicide as bad death.

The centrality of agency in vernacular definitions of suicide thus stands in tension with equally widespread assumptions about victimhood or "patiency" (Schnepel 2009) in suicide, which hold that the act is caused by influence of agents, forces, or structures located outside the person, such as demons, kin relations, illness, or violence. Attempts at locating agency outside of the suicidal person have historically been important in deflecting moral or legal sanction away from the suicidal person or, as we prefer to call them, the *suicidé*.[3] As historian Rab Houston points out, the growing popularity of legal and medical verdicts of "lacking wrongful intent" (*non compos mentis*) among forensic coroners after 1750 went hand in hand with a substitution of ideas of sinful blasphemy for medicalized explanations (Houston 2009).

Counter to extra-personal explanations *for* suicides are issues to be explained *by* suicide. Suicide events are often assumed to point toward broader social problems in the wider world. The questions they pose may then assume a political character. How, for example, should one make sense of the fact that more US soldiers have died from suicide than in combat since the war in Afghanistan began (Gibbs and Thompson 2012)? Does this fact tell us something about gender (masculinity), bureaucratic indifference, or institutional pressure in the military?

3 In this introduction we use the French word suicidé to refer to the person committing/attempting/contemplating suicide. This avoids the potential confusion of referring to both the (suicide) act and the (suicide) victim by the same term "suicide," as is common in the English language. More importantly, suicidé is grammatically a peculiar passive-active construction (like employee—an agent, but not quite as active as its counterpart, the employer). We therefore prefer the term over the commonly used "suicide victim" "suicide completer" and "suicide attempter," as each of these stresses only one aspect of the agency/patiency divide.

Similarly, what is to be made of the news that suicide rates in Europe increased following the financial crisis or that, following the suicides of several people dispossessed of their homes, Spanish banks had to temporarily suspend evictions (Dowsett 2012)? What is to be learned from the study of these news reports about alienation, fear, and the structural violence of economic orders? From an anthropological perspective, the question can be formulated thus: How can we appreciate the diagnostic potential of suicide cases—their inherently accusatory nature and their seismographic detection of social dysfunctionality and structural violence—without, however, resorting to universalizing positivism that ignores context-specific understandings of the indictment expressed through suicide? The anthropology of suicide must acknowledge that the diagnostic potential of suicide cases is equally shaped by history and power.

The central challenge for an anthropology of suicide is to uncover and describe the peculiar tension of agency prevalent in specific ethnographic settings, including in their inhabitants' explanatory repertoire and in the explanatory repertoire of anthropology itself. This means making sense of agency and patiency in situated discourses and in expert knowledge regimes that come to bear on particular cases of self-destruction. With such focus, anthropology may be able to contribute novel perspective to medical and sociological suicidology, to which we turn next.

Disciplining Suicide and the Challenge of Ethnography

The secularization of suicide since the eighteenth century has replaced its theological conception as a mortal sin and abomination (Weaver and Wright 2009) and given rise to two major currents of European thought on the issue, which Anthony Giddens calls the "*thèse psychiatrique*" and the "*thèse sociologique*" (1977: 328). While the psychiatric thesis, or "psy" discourse as Ian Marsh (2010)—following Nicolas Rose (1998)—calls it, transformed suicide from sin to mental disease and thereby relocated it into the realm of medical sciences, the sociological thesis detached suicide from moral consideration at the individual level by treating suicide rates as quantitative indicators of social constraints on the individual. Although the two currents or scientific ontologies (psychiatric medical sciences, quantitative epidemiology and sociology) have general applicability, the topic of suicide was instrumental in their creation and consolidation. Consequently, suicide was "pathologized" at the individual level by medicalization and at the collective level by the removal of any moorings within individual contexts and by understanding suicide rates as social facts indexing large-scale social turbulences, social pathologies or "anomie" in Durkheim's classical formulation (1952: 201–39). These two currents of thought have shaped commonsense understandings of suicide worldwide and laid the foundations for suicide studies as a modern discipline.

Suicidology is a complex and well-established field (see Shneidman 2001) inhabiting the intersection of clinical psychology, public health, and quantitative sociology. Range and Leache's review (1998) of leading journals in suicidology

acknowledges some of the discipline's major achievements, which include gathering impressive knowledge about risk factors in relation to age, gender, and mental health. Suicidology has refined classification algorithms for suicide, calculates probabilities and can provide statistics of suicidal ideation (talk of suicide) among certain at-risk groups or predict the prospects of medication and cognitive-behavioral therapy among suicidal clinical patients. Despite all this knowledge and an increasingly fine-grained vocabulary that distinguishes between suicide attempts, suicide ideation, acts of self-harm, and suicide mortality, suicide as a concept remains complicated. The idea of suicide in suicidology, Range and Leach argue, retains "philosophical roots in logical positivism and structural determinism" (1998: 24).

The authors in this volume share the view that anthropology, with its emphasis on ethnography, offers a valuable alternative to the predominantly applied research agendas of suicidology. Perhaps most importantly, anthropology as we understand it aims at a symmetrical treatment of expert and vernacular modes of making sense of suicides. In the domain of the "*thèse psychiatrique*," much of critical medical anthropology today destabilizes Eurocentric certainties surrounding the medical sciences' knowledge claims by bringing in questions of power, the geopolitics of knowledge, and divergent ontologies of body, personhood, health/well-being, and death. The growing interest in the anthropology of suicide more generally, to which this volume attests, is a catalyst for the "provincialization" of suicidology's taken-for-granted ideas about personhood or subjectivity.

In the domain of the "*thèse sociologique*," ethnography also adds a complementary perspective to statistical approaches. Many authors, most prominently perhaps sociologist Jack Douglas (1967: 167–210), have pointed to the methodological problems involved in the positivist production of and reliance on aggregate suicide data. These problems are well known and include the way coroners and police investigators are required to produce unambiguous results, the way legal implications, stigma, and shame may encourage community members to conceal suicides from the authorities, and the way national and transnational statistical organizations, such as national crime records bureaus or the World Health Organization, produce their data. However questionable the production of suicide statistics may be, ethnographers of suicide cannot afford not to take suicide statistics seriously. This is because modern suicide is entangled in a world of indicators: suicide statistics are social facts, not in the way Durkheim understood them, as seismic instruments that speak of the inner life of society, but in Paul Rabinow's sense that "representations are social facts" (1986). Anthropologists have not come to believe unquestioningly in the ontological foundations of statistical indicators; instead, they have begun to appreciate the performative power of science and state-produced representations of social problems. To put it another way, anthropology has made statistical representations and their effects on populations the object of ethnographic inquiry (e.g. Li 2007; Münster 2012).

The anthropological study of suicide must not be limited to producing intimate ethnographies of individual suicide cases. It would be a mistake to

reduce the potential of ethnography in the study of suicide to the role of adding cultural context to an understanding of individual suicide cases. In other words, a turn to situated life histories and narratives of suicides is not a panacea for all methodological fallacies of statistical and psychological approaches to suicide. French anthropologist Charles Macdonald has pointed out that conventional ethnographic approaches are prone to what he calls "the case studies fallacy." By this he means the problem that the sequence of events and circumstances that is often singled out to explain a suicide case would be meaningless without the final act of self-harm: "Suppose now that the same case or sequence of events is told, but omitting the final n+1—then what? The whole case vanishes altogether as a suicide story, but it remains a perfectly plausible life story, perhaps sad, but not ending in death" (Macdonald 2007: 227). The case studies approach, employed in many classical ethnographies (Bohannan 1960; Firth 1961; Malinowski 1978) thus suffers from an inherent drive to explain suicide cases by the sequence of events preceding the suicide, while ignoring similar sequences that were not followed by suicide. In other words, the meaning ascribed to particular events in life is determined by viewing them retrospectively through the lens of suicide.

The ethnographies assembled in this volume (not all chapters are ethnographic; see Jaworski, Sharp and Linos) take a different route altogether. Their intention is neither to uncover the one interpretive key to unlock the meaning of suicide practices in society X nor to explain suicide rates with reference to transformations in society Y. Instead, the chapters collected here use ethnography to interrogate the boundaries of the category of suicide itself and to make important points about the discursive uses of suicide in everyday life. Given this, it is scarcely the aim of the authors to achieve an ethnographic proximity to suicide, in the sense of getting as close as possible in a temporal, spatial, or empathic sense to suicide acts. Rather, they study what may be called *suicide fields*—the wider domains of practices and of sense making, out of which realized, imaginary, or disputed suicides emerge. Instead of producing claims about the causality of suicide, which would compete with psychological or sociological accounts, the ethnographic approach substitutes analytical explanations of suicide(s) for the study of "popular discourse about causality" (Staples, this volume), the "moral talk about farmers' suicides" (Münster, this volume), children's suicide games (Widger, this volume), or "women's allusions to, jokes about, and fantasies of willful death" (Chua, this volume). Representations of real and imaginary suicide provide idioms through which ethnographers may engage in conversation about culturally specific notions of illfare and the good life. Although ethnographers may engage with suicide in order to speak about gender, youth, neoliberalism, or agrarian ecologies, among other things, the study of suicide is more than another arbitrary entry point for the anthropological study of social and cultural complexity. Suicide, as a way of "death making" (Chua, this volume) and as bad death, seems to offer unique opportunities for speaking about existential matters: life and death, justice and revenge, success and failure, power and resistance, personhood and individuality, agency and victimhood.

Our enthusiasm about ethnographic approaches nevertheless should not be mistaken for anthropological complacency. Though the anthropology of suicide has sought to decenter Western ontologies, avoid the pathologizing psy-discourse and interrogate positivist frameworks of suicidology, it may not be able to resolve the tension of agency inherent to the "*thèse psychiatrique*" and the "*thèse sociologique*," either: ethnographers, like everyone else, simultaneously ask why the suicidé "did" it and who or what "made them do" it. In most ethnographic studies, suicides are treated both as indications of individual choices and pathologies and as diagnostics of larger structural constellations. What perhaps differentiates ethnographic studies of suicide from their counterparts in sociology and psychology is their symmetrical treatment of popular and authoritative knowledge about suicide. In the anthropology of suicide, scientific, administrative and legal representations about suicide become objects of investigation. Reyes-Foster's chapter explores Mexican expert knowledge systems and vernacular modes of making sense of suicide in a single framework as commensurable and curiously entangled discourses. Münster's chapter discusses how the media hype around Indian farmers' suicides and the classification of a South Indian region as "suicide prone" by the developmental state feeds back into vernacular debates about suicide and possibly into suicidal practices. This looping effect is also pointed out by Tom Waidzunas, who, drawing on Ian Hacking, argues that the circulation of statistical representations of gay teen suicides has problematic effects on the identity formation of young gays (Waidzunas 2011).

The authors in this volume cannot and need not compete with the scientific methodologies and epistemologies of suicidology. Instead of struggling to define suicide or to explain its positive correlation to neurobiological, genetic, or social-structural properties, the ethnographies assembled here largely seek to explore the fuzzy edges of the concept of suicide and the practices of self-destruction. Instead of starting off from a definition of the core concept, which would be dependent on modernist dichotomies and implicit notions of agency and personhood, many authors in this volume approach suicide and agency via phenomena that may or may not fall under the rubric of suicide "proper." Flora's Greenlandic ethnography critiques Durkheimian understandings of suicide by focusing its ethnographic lenses on walking into the wilderness, another form of willful death, or rather, as Flora would put it, another form of self-detachment, known locally as *qivittoq*. Chua's, Staples's and Widger's ethnographies explore the fine line between suicide and what suicidologists would call "suicide ideation": imagining, invoking, playing, threatening, and staging suicide. Focusing ethnographically on such non-fatal suicidal action avoids, in Chua's words, "presumptive framings about intentionality, sincerity, destruction, and fatality" in the suicide analysis. Münster's ethnography also maintains analytical distance from the actuality of suicide cases and possible reasons for farmers' suicides, focusing instead on situated accounts—the various ways of writing and talking about the subject. He shows how the moral panic about such suicides becomes a productive idiom for farmers to rethink their agrarian practices. Sharp and Linos develop an

anthropological understanding of Palestinian suicide bombings, yet another self-destructive practice that, being notoriously difficult to frame as either pathology or anemia, is peripheral to the focus of suicidology—it is too violent against others, overtly tactical, and political. By focusing on suicide attacks, Sharp and Linos make a convincing case for widening our understanding of personhood within anthropologies of suicide to include the actual materiality of the person as a "corporeal entity."

Dwelling analytically at the boundaries of what people in general and scientists more specifically call suicide has proven to be productive for anthropology and related disciplines. Rane Willerslev (2009) presented the voluntary assisted death among Chukchi reindeer herders as a form of sacrifice that is locally perceived as categorically and morally distinct from suicide "proper." James Laidlaw (2005) pointed out the distinction drawn between voluntary fasting to death as a spiritual practice among Indian Jains and the same community's ridicule of "real" suicide as fool's death. Such works, together with the empirical material collected in this volume, suggest that questions about agency, which include issues of intentionality, knowledge, "voluntarism" (Osborne 2005), and responsibility, are central to the boundary work around the term suicide and hence for defining the object of study. In the following section, we elaborate on the logical tension of agency in scholarly, expert and lay engagements with suicide cases.

The Tension of Agency: Denial, Necessity, and Ambivalence in Definitions of Suicide

The International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-10) issued by the World Health Organization lists "intentional self-harm" in the section titled "External Causes of Morbidity and Mortality."[4] Hence the causes of intentional self-harm, which include suicide, are classified alongside assaults, traffic accidents and "complications of medical and surgical care," as external to the victim. Without wishing to labor this point, we believe that the categorical paradox epitomizes a more general tension between the requirement for agency and a simultaneous denial or diffusion of the agency of the suicidé in both popular and scientific understandings of suicide. This is at the same time a tension between two notions of the term "agency": intentionality and responsibility. Suicide categorically requires singular and undivided intention, yet cultural etiologies of suicide rarely attribute full responsibility to the agent. In suicide discourse, singular intention stands in tension with diffused responsibility. For modern understandings of suicide, the diffusion of agency is mediated via sociological and psychological approaches.

4 Available online at http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2010/en (accessed 30 March 2012).

To develop our argument, we start by looking at the way suicidology defines its object of study. Emile Durkheim defined suicide as "all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative *act of the victim himself*, which he *knows* will produce this result" (Durkheim 1952: xii; original emphasis replaced by our emphasis). One of the latest influential definitions of suicide, formulated by De Leo et al., considers it as "an act with fatal outcome, which the deceased, *knowing or expecting* a potentially fatal outcome, has *initiated and carried out with the purpose* of bringing about wanted changes" (2006: 12; our emphasis). The common denominator in these definitions is the agentive involvement of the suicidé, who is conceived as the sole author of his/her own death. In fact, the vast majority of suicide definitions formulated within suicidology are in this respect very similar. They identify the suicidé as the agent of the act "to distinguish between homicide and suicide" and invoke his/her intent, knowing, or comprehension to distinguish "between accidental and suicidal behavior" (Andriessen 2006: 534). The World Health Organization has even replaced the terms "suicide" and "suicide attempt" with "intentional self-harm" in its lexicon, which clearly highlights the centrality of intentional agency.

Intention and comprehension appear to be fundamental aspects of any definition of suicide, yet, for suicidologists, these are the features of the definition that are most difficult to operationalize. How can one ascertain the intentions of a deceased person? How can one deal with the multiplicity and sometimes contradictory nature of motives behind a single suicide act (Andriessen 2006; see De Leo et al. 2006)? What about suicidal acts in which "success" (mortality) depends on the ability or inability of another person to intervene in time? These questions become increasingly complex if we understand the self in certain contexts to be deeply relational rather than atomized. Yet, as some attempts at defining suicide without reference to intention or its equivalents have shown (cf. Egel 1999), the category of suicide becomes fuzzy and indistinguishable from that of accidents, murders, or the behavior of mentally ill individuals. Assessing the degree of human agency is central in determining causes of death, which in turn can be used to apportion legal and moral responsibility and blame of various kinds. In this respect, suicidology operates within the same logical framework as its nineteenth-century predecessors, not to mention the medieval courts whose distinction of an insane person not intending or comprehending the outcome of their own action (*non compos mentis*) from the sane one committing the conscious crime of self-murder (*felo de se*) (cf. Morrissey 2006: 41–2; Laragy 2013) seems likewise to rest on a notion of intentional agency.

Emerging statistical records of national suicide mortality rates in the nineteenth century laid the foundation for a contrary conceptualization of the problem of intentionality: the diffusion of individual agency in suicide. Ian Hacking summarized the problem thus:

> Despite visible trends and perturbations in the short term, national suicide rates are remarkably stable. This was noticed at the very beginning of suicide statistics

> and led, in the 1850s, to bizarre but very influential arguments that human beings do not have free will since the proportion of those who kill themselves, in a given population, is itself a law of social nature. (Hacking 2008: 8)

According to Hacking, such radical conclusions stemmed from the fact that suicide had previously been treated by some thinkers as the ultimate proof of human agency or free will. David Hume, for example, opined that "the one power that we have and that the gods lack is that we can kill ourselves" (paraphrased by Ian Hacking 2008: 4; see also Morrissey 2006: 3).

Later in the nineteenth century, Emile Durkheim drew a conceptual distinction between individual suicide cases on the one hand and suicide rates as a total social fact on the other. Even though he never arrived at any convincing "link between the way individual suicides are committed and social causation" (Gane 2005: 223), the overall message of his *Le Suicide* was nevertheless that "something as intimate as deciding to put an end to one's life results from the inflictions of others" (Vargas 2010: 209). This external other that ultimately causes suicide was for Durkheim "society" viewed as having an ontology of its own (Durkheim 1952: xiv). Thus, suicide was indicative not of the agency of the suicidé but of other processes or phenomena, such as the level of social integration of the victim. In effect, the intentional agency of the suicidé required by Durkheim's definition of suicide is undermined by his main explanatory achievement. Durkheim's "invention" of social constraint gave rise to the structure vs. agency dilemma in the social sciences, which could be seen as yet another version of theological debates about an omnipotent God and impotent humans or philosophical debates about free will and determinism.

The "*thèse psychiatrique*" also effectively diminishes the agency-as-responsibility of the suicidé by viewing any suicide as having been "caused" by mental illness or psychological disorder. Hence suicidal individuals became "positioned within this discourse of pathology as mentally unwell, and thus not fully responsible for their actions" (Marsh 2013: 749). The pathologizing "psy" discourses, which established individual suicide cases as indicative of the suicidé's medical condition rather than their agency, implied causes that, we argue, are "outside the person" as much as the sociological causes. Mental illness, just like the genes of which it is often said to be an effect (cf. Bondy et al. 2006; Mann et al. 2001), is conceptualized as part of one's body and identity but also as an entity external to it, for it is not limited to a single individual. Rather, genetically determined dispositions to illness are imagined as being passed from one generation to another, and in this sense they are extra-individual (Ingold 2000: 134–9). Furthermore, the (mental) illness is often spoken about as an entity distinct from the one who suffers from it, which is even recognized and utilized in some therapeutic approaches (Topf 1995).

In the process of secularizing the study of suicide, the emerging scientific disciplines of moral statistics and psychiatry have called into question the individual agency in the act (Morrissey 2006: 2). The consequences of this

deflection of agency include both a de-criminalization and a de-politicization of suicide. Suicides ceased to be moral abominations but also ceased to be taken seriously as accusatory performances. The result of such changes is a tension of agency in suicide. The tension of agency is effective in popular and scholarly accounts of suicide whenever agency is deflected away from the suicidé towards sociological or psychological constraints (thus reducing the agent to the status of a victim), while simultaneously depending on an (at least implicit) notion of intentional agency in order to speak of suicide in the first place.

This volume offers a variety of examples of the tension of agency in suicide also from vernacular contexts. Broz (this volume), for instance, describes distributed agency in the context of a Siberian village, in which suicide is explained by a "soul-loss" prior to the suicidal act. The suicidé is thus rendered a victim, and their agentive involvement in the act is eroded to some degree. Reyes-Foster (this volume) describes a similar victimization of a suicidé in a Yucatec Maya village, where the act is attributed to the workings of the devil. Importantly, she observes convergences between these situated understandings of suicide and the biomedical discourse of mental illness imprinted in the state-sponsored suicide prevention program. She argues that the two interpretations proved surprisingly compatible because "the contradictory nature of the Yucatecan attitude toward suicide is a sympathetic template upon which biomedical discourse can map itself." It becomes evident from contributions in this volume, as well as from other ethnographies of suicide (e.g. Laidlaw 2005; Imberton 2012), that the tension of agency in suicide, as described above, is not specific to contemporary Western scientific discourses. Rather, it can be found in most situated attempts at making sense of suicide.

Suicide and Personhood

In the previous section we argued that the tension of agency, the dialectic of agency and patiency is intimately related to situated understandings of intentionality and responsibility in suicide. In this section we will expand on our argument about the simultaneous denial and attribution of agency in suicide discourse by suggesting that this tension is associated with diverse ideas about personhood that are often subscribed to simultaneously.

Theoretical advances in the social sciences and humanities have gradually "provincialized" (cf. Chakrabarty 2000) and destabilized Western conceptions of the bounded, unique human person as the only legitimate agent (Geertz 1974). Anthropologists have pointed out their anthropocentrism (Teubner 2006) and the more general Western "predilection for 'entities' and other static forms of being" (Course 2007: 21) and "bias toward singularity" (Callon and Law 1995: 499) when it comes to attribution of agency. Contemporary social theory has effectively re-extended the franchise of agency to "non-humans" (to paraphrase Callon and Law 1995: 482), be they animals or material objects of various kinds (see e.g. Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Latour 2005).

In the light of data from non-Western socio-cultural contexts, human personhood has also been radically re-thought. For researchers following Marilyn Strathern's (1988) influential study, persons in Melanesia and elsewhere are, "not the repository of a unitary or bounded identity but rather composed of social relations, and in this sense [thinkable] as 'dividual' or 'partible' entities" (Carsten 2003: 94) . In other words, they are "inherently social." While numerous studies have demonstrated the theoretical appeal of such a conception of personhood, some have also challenged the dichotomy between Western "individual" and non-Western "dividual," partible, or composite persons. In response to new phenomena (such as reproductive and prosthetic technologies) and refined ethnographic sensibilities, anthropologists argued that the assumption of individual personhood in the West may be little more than utopian phantasies of liberal philosophers (see Ouroussoff 1993) and have reconceptualized it, alongside other social theorists (Haraway 1991, 1997), as equally "joined-up," distributed, and relational (cf. Carsten 2003: 95–108).

These advances in social theory have had little impact on the study of suicide, regardless of the enthusiastic call for an anthropological imagination in suicidology (cf. Corin 1995; Kral 1998). Given the Western pedigree of suicidology, it is hardly surprising that it operates, as psychologist and ethnographer Michael Kral argues, with a "person-centered view of suicide" (1998: 229).[5] This categorical dependence on specifically Western and liberal regime of the self leads researchers to ignore "the historical and cultural formation of … suicidal subjects" and "the historical and cultural resources potentially able to counteract or resist suicide [as these] are seen to be of only marginal importance relative to the identification and treatment of individual mental disorders" (Marsh 2013: 749).

Many authors represented in this volume demonstrate the great potential of studying local conceptions of what it means to be a person and asking who else might be ascribed with agency in the suicide field. Persons and their others may contextually merge when humans are seen not as bounded subjects, whose behavior is influenced, shaped, or determined by social structures or bio-medical mechanisms, but as extended or distributed beyond the individual. Reyes-Foster, for example, speaks about the Mayan conception of personhood, in which "every person can extend into every other person that occupies the same place." Broz argues that in Altai (Siberia) domestic animals are a part of the personhood of their master and that they execute his or her agency. Many chapters also describe suicide fields in which important roles are given to entities, such as spirits or the devil, whose ontology must appear dubious from the perspective of Western suicidology.

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5 We nevertheless disagree with Kral's assertion that for suicidology "the ultimate origin of suicide, whatever the stressful precursors, lies within the person" (1998: 229). Rather, the "person-centered" view stands for what we called above the "requirement of agency," while the "tension of agency" is created by the simultaneous placement of the origin of suicide outside the suicidé.

Bringing local notions of personhood and agency into suicide studies once again raises questions about the universal applicability of the concept of suicide. If someone's death is understood locally as having been inflicted by, say, an evil spirit, can we still speak about the compatibility of such a notion of death with suicidology's category of suicide? How can one characterize acts of people that are seen locally as incomplete, de-composed? Are they agents of their own death, and can they commit suicide? We believe that, regardless of such important doubts, the category of suicide retains its comparative appeal. First, as we have argued above, vernacular distributions of intentionality and responsibility in suicide fields could share certain similarities with the tension of agency in academic suicidology. Such similarity makes many vernacular and expert understandings more compatible with each other than commonly thought and thus makes the ubiquitous tension of agency a good basis for a transcultural study of suicide. Second, a priori limitation of the category of suicide to western contexts would only lead to schematized "West vs. the rest" oppositions. As Staples (this volume) warns us, the dichotomization of Western and non-Western notions of a person could be misleading, not only because western notions of personhood are often relational, but also because various non-western theories of the suicide problem invoke assumptions about the boundedness of individuals. Moreover, in many contexts, as Staples demonstrates in his Indian ethnography, several notions of a person may be applied simultaneously:

> Those engaged in suicide in India constitute themselves—and are constituted by others—both as individual agents who undertake unilateral acts intended, at the moment they occur, to result in particular outcomes; and as dispersed, fluid dividuals, where intent and consequences of a suicidal act are situated across a number of social agents—including parents and family members, spirits, and the evil eye. (Staples, this volume)

Drawing on Staples' argument, we suggest that at the heart of the "tension of agency in suicide" lie not only divergent yet concurrent notions of agency, as argued above, but also divergent yet simultaneously used notions of personhood. If a person is conceptualized as a unique individual and at the same time as a fluid dividual, he or she is then easily conceivable as being and simultaneously not being the sole author of his or her death. Such a perspective points to another aspect of the question of personhood and agency in suicide, namely, "person-making" in the suicide field.

Suicidology generally assumes that the persons inhabiting the suicide fields exist prior to the act of suicide. While Jaworski (this volume) challenges this taken-for-granted premise from a Foucauldian, post-structuralist perspective, other authors do so by observing subjectivity and personhood in the making: they document the ways in which persons are contextually re-produced, often as immoral or moral, in their respective suicide fields. By doing so, they follow Ian Marsh's call to observe the "formation of particular kinds of 'suicidal subjectivities' in

relation to the production and circulation of authoritative medical and psychiatric knowledge" (Marsh 2013: 751). Here the value added by anthropology lies in bringing examples of the formation of "suicidal subjectivities" from contexts characterized by very different views of morality and of (moral) personhood to the study of suicide and agency.

Suicide and Power: Agency and Patiency

Seen through the lens of power relations, acts of suicide are not only about death and dying but also about life and the living. Conventional suicidologies seem to privilege death and pathology as the problem space of suicide. Moral statistics logically begin with the counting of unambiguously dead bodies, whereas the "medical/psychiatric style of thought" (Marsh 2013: 747) operates closely within a "compulsory ontology of pathology," to use Ian Marsh's expression: "Suicide is formulated as pathological and individual, as tragic, and not to be read as in any way positive" (Marsh 2010: 47). Yet many suicidal acts, as Tom Widger (this volume) writes in his chapter on Sri Lanka, "are rarely concerned with dying but seeking new ways of living." In terms of ontology, many of the ethnographies assembled here place suicide in life rather than in death and pathology; they explore ways of living with suicide and the productivity of suicide in fields of power. The capacity of the living to do things with suicide is best captured by a classical notion of agency that refers to spaces of freedom and the human capacity to act within structures of power. The anthropology of suicide articulates with foundational anthropological questions about domination and resistance, hegemony and freedom, power and authorship (see Jaworski this volume). At the same time, the politics of suicide displays the same tension of agency—its dialectical denial and overemphasis—that is so ubiquitous in most suicide discourses. Anthropological engagements with the articulation of suicide and power are simultaneously anthropologies of agency and patiency, free will and victimhood, and sovereignty and bare life (Agamben 1998).

Anthropological studies of suicide have pointed to the accusation inherent in most suicidal attempts and successful suicides, even those related to issues of "domestic justice" (Wu 2010). The question, then, is who is accused (implicitly or otherwise) through the suicidal act? Does the rage of the suicidal violence speak to the suicidé's immediate livelihood circumstances, does it reach to the local exploiter/violator, or is it an indictment of the larger structural violence of politics and political economy (see Farmer 2003)? Anthropological theorizing on suicide, beginning with Malinowski (1978 [1926]) and Firth (1961), seems to agree that most suicides entail elements of accusation or revenge or of an indictment against wrongdoers in kinship affairs, and that suicides are ultimately communicative acts and have, in Anthony Giddens' words, a "social aetiology" (Giddens 1964, 1977).

Beyond the implicit micro politics of most suicides, anthropologists deal with explicitly political suicides (Andriolo 2002, 2006; Feldman 1991) and stress that these suicides have a *message* and that it is their strategic objective, as Karin

Andriolo argues, to get that message across to whoever/whatever is responsible for the "wrong of moral, political, or economic dimension, a wrong that affects the lives of many" (2006: 102). She understands protest suicides as "embodied minding," the quite literal inscription of a political message onto the body of the protester: "Protest suicide is dying with a message, for a message, and of a message. The body becomes the site on which self-destructive mimesis denounces the wrongs that humans have wrought" (Andriolo 2006: 102). Sharp and Linos (this volume) move beyond such a communicative model of protest suicide, by considering the role of body parts in the tactical employment of suicide bombing by Palestinian combatants. One could argue that there is no message inscribed into these bodies, but that the blood, organs, and other body parts of the suicide attacker are themselves a necro-political pollutant with the potency to re-classify space as Palestinian instead of Israeli.

Many authors in this volume take a different approach to political agency in suicide to that followed by Andriolo, who clearly distinguishes protest suicides with clear-cut messages and political authorship—such as the deaths of hunger strikers in Northern Ireland, South Asian self-immolations, and the case of the South Korean farmer-activist who stabbed himself at the World Trade Organization's Cancún summit—from "regular" suicides with their histories of personal and psychological "suicidality." Instead, they examine the political content in "suicidality." The challenge, we argue, is not to distinguish political from pathological suicides, but rather to move beyond voluntaristic understandings of self-destruction, which would require an autonomous will on the part of the suicidé to count as political. The ethnographies in this volume examine how less spectacular suicides (compared to public protest suicides) by young people (Staples this volume), indebted farmers (Münster this volume), or older women (Chua this volume) may function as political acts, indictments against structures of constraint, or performances of "J'accuse" in the face of power, or how even quotidian suicide can create, as Widger (this volume) puts it, "opportunities for social and moral action and commentary."

Ethnographic attention to power and the political does not necessarily grant agency to the suicidé. A focus on the role of structural violence (Farmer 2004) and resistance may render the suicide just another "reflection" of political economic changes beyond the control of the individual. From this perspective, crises, transformations, and the violence of structures and organizations, as well as bad relationships of any sort, are too easily understood as "driving" the person to suicide. The agency of the suicidé is reduced to victimhood; their death ultimately becomes an effect of power. In considering suicide and power, there is thus a thin line between a denial of and an overemphasis of agency.

In making suicide the object of study, critically realist ethnographies of the contemporary human condition will have to engage with the epistemological challenge of adequately appreciating the diagnostic qualities of suicide. What do we learn about contemporary life and the effects of power on populations by studying suicide? Does the study of suicide provide ethnographers with a diagnostic

tool for detecting "pathologies of power" (Farmer 2003) and the necro-politics of global capitalism? Anthropologists will have to demonstrate how suicide can tell us better than other forms of human action about the central concerns of our times and about how people dwell in the contemporary world. The contributions to this volume, we believe, demonstrate the richness of the new perspectives that can be gained by studying fields of suicide, power, and agency.

Conclusion

In this introduction we have argued that most academic and vernacular notions of suicide are predicated on the agentive involvement of the suicidé. We have further demonstrated that both vernacular and scientific attempts to make sense of suicide simultaneously undermine or distribute the agency of the suicidé—their sole authorship of the act—which leads to what we call the tension of agency in suicide. Ethnographic approaches to studying suicide, which most authors of this volume employ and advocate, do not overcome this tension of agency. On the contrary, as pointed out above, they create a similar kind of tension: most ethnographic studies treat suicides both as expressions of individual choice and as indicators of pathologies of power and larger structural constellations.

The lesson we draw from the works collected in this volume is that aiming to resolve the tension of agency in suicide is pointless. Instead, we suggest focusing anthropological attention on the study of how this tension plays out in particular vernacular and scientific contexts and, using the reflexive faculty of anthropology, how it becomes manifest in our own analysis. The tension of agency in suicide points to a continuum of causality and responsibility, ranging from the sole authorship of the suicidé to plain victimhood of the suicidé subjected to external forces (social, chemical, invisible). The positioning of particular acts of self-destruction along this continuum is dialectically connected to the moral evaluation of suicide in particular contexts. On the one hand, convictions about the im/morality of suicide determine the un/ease with which the agentive involvement of the suicidé and even the categorization of particular deaths as suicide could be reinterpreted. On the other hand, ideas about suicidé's agentive involvement in the act often determine local moral classification of suicide as a category. When people contest interpretations of particular suicides, they could be understood as rhetorically moving the case along the continuum and shifting emphasis between different and yet simultaneously used notions of personhood and agency. If someone is conceptualized as a unique individual and at the same time as a fluid dividual, they are then easily conceived as being and simultaneously not being the sole author of their death, depending on which understanding of the person is contextually stressed.

The authors of this volume see situated efforts to make sense of suicide as being predicated on specific notions of agency, intentionality, subjectivity, and personhood. In this sense, the anthropology of suicide, just like the dominant

"psychologizing" and "sociologizing" approaches, sees suicide as indicative of complex concerns. The reflexive enterprise of anthropology nevertheless aims at non-reductionist ways of understanding the indicative dimension of suicide. Even when treating particular suicide fields as indicative of local notions of agency, personhood, or intentionality, suicide is never reduced to such notions; rather, these notions help us, in a manner of mutual explication, to better comprehend local ontologies of suicide.

We remain skeptical about a universal definition of suicide and, instead, work towards an anthropological notion of suicide by comparatively engaging with varieties of self-destructive action and their contested interpretations. Hence, the category of suicide is employed in this volume as a fluid heuristic tool, a provisional agreement about the subject of series of disagreements generated in each particular ethnographic setting, regardless of whether it stands for popular or authoritative knowledge. Such symmetrical treatment of different kinds of knowledge about suicide supports the overall claim of this volume, namely that the category of suicide is almost universally intertwined with particular notions of agency and personhood and with the connected tension of agency in suicide.

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PART II
Suicide, Personhood and Relationality

Chapter 2
Personhood, Agency and Suicide in a Neo-Liberalizing South India

James Staples[1]

If we accept, as an anthropological or sociological audience might well do, that suicide attempts[2] cannot be wholly understood as isolated, individual acts, divorced from the contexts and sets of relationships within which they occur, then it follows that any exploration of what causes suicidal acts also needs to consider local constructions of personhood and agency. In the case of my own research area, South Asia, an enduring distinction in the ethnographic record has been that drawn between Western persons as stable, self-contained individuals, and their South Asian—or otherwise non-Western (cf. Strathern 1988)—counterparts as "dividuals" (Marriott 1989: 17). Westerners, to quote Geertz, tend to view the person as a "bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against its social and natural background" (1983: 59). South Asian "dividuals," on the other hand, have been characterized as substantially connected to other people and things, literally transformed through their transactions in ways that Western "individuals" are not (see, for examples, Busby 1997; Daniel 1987; Das 1979; Marriott 1976, 1989; Staples 2003: 296–7). Such acts as birth, marriage and food-sharing are all seen as involving an exchange of bodies, substances or body parts (e.g., Inden and Nicholas 1977: 17–18), a perspective reinforced by

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2 For the purposes of this chapter I have opted for the term "suicide attempts" as a general gloss to include comparable acts that might or might not have resulted in actual death, and acts—as was commonly the case—where intentionality was ambiguous. In many cases, I shall argue, it was not that the death was either intended or not: rather, it was accepted as a possible outcome.

classical Ayurveda, in which "the body is described not so much as a more or less sealed container … but rather as a landscape, an open field with all the processes flowing visibly, at or near the surface" (Trawick 1992: 148). As a consequence, it is argued that people come to see and experience themselves as continuous with others rather than as self-contained units.

If this is so, might the responsibility for suicide attempts be located not solely within the individuals who attempt it, but more broadly within the nexus of relations they might have with other people and things? And might such a worldview—as I explore in the following—enable us to conceptualize suicide attempts less as individual acts and more as something analogous to the final stages of a dance involving two or more interconnected persons, played out against very particular, and continuously changing, socio-cultural backdrops?

Before I pursue these lines of argument, I should note first that this oppositional positioning of Western and non-Western models of personhood is, of course, to overstate the absolute differences between the two perspectives (Staples 2011a; Staples 2003: 296; see also Fuller 1992: 12; Parry 1989: 494–512). It is also to ignore a body of work that emphasizes the South Asian individual and the efforts taken by Hindu persons to counter or prevent mixing across fluid boundaries (e.g., McHugh 1989; Mines 1988, 1994; Mines and Gourishankar 1990; Parish 1994); and to set up a series of false dichotomies, including those drawn between monism and dualism, individualism and dividualism, and "the West versus the rest" (see, e.g., Carsten 2004). In addition, while the ethnographic record provides many examples of people who exemplify dividual models of personhood very well, there are many in India—Dalits, the leprosy-affected Christian converts I worked with, a growing urban middle class, to list just a few—who actively resist such a perspective. The same persons might also be more or less bounded or fluid across different contexts (e.g., Spencer 1997; Mosse 2006), or, as Busby (1997) demonstrates by comparing Indian and (drawing on Strathern 1988) Melanesian personhood, dividual in different ways cross-culturally.[3] Some people—women in particular—might also be considered permanently more fluid than others (Lamb 2000). To complicate the picture further still, there is a growing body of work demonstrating that not all Westerners are as bounded as comparisons between the two might imply (Carsten 2004; Staples 2003: 296; Bourdieu 1984: 206).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding these counter arguments, most anthropologists of India continue to accept that those with a South Asian worldview have at least *tended* towards relatively more fluid conceptions of personhood than their Western counterparts, with shifts towards more atomized notions of the body and person—which might well jar with concurrently held notions of fluid personhood—a more recent consequence of global capitalism and other related

3 Busby (1997) argues that while Melanesians might be seen, according to Strathern's descriptions, as internally divided, partible persons, South Indian persons are by contrast internally whole, with fluid or permeable bodily boundaries (see also discussion in Carsten 2004: 126–34).

factors, such as, in my own fieldsite, widespread conversion to Christianity. If we accept this broad premise—while remaining alert to the contradictions and nuances within it—then we also need to explore its implications for analyzing a whole range of social phenomena and assumptions made about people and their actions more generally. The tensions set up between the binaries of individualism and dividualism or between structure and agency might be false ones, but, to use Lévi-Strauss' phrase, they are sometimes "good to think with" (1963: 89). They enable us to consider, for example, whether it makes sense to think in terms of individual, rather than more dispersed, agency, and to interrogate the relationship between personhood and agency. In relation to the themes of this chapter, we might also ask if suicide can ever be analyzed, as Western psychologists sometimes reduce it to, as an individual act: a consequence of "violence turned inwards" (Menninger 1988). Suicide, I argue here, needs to be explored in relation to local ideas about personhood and agency, while, at the same time, such local ideas might also be better understood through an ethnographic examination of suicide.

Explanations for increased rates of youth suicide in the South Indian leprosy colony where I conducted research were reduced, in popular discourse about causality, to the familiar categories of debt, unfulfilled aspiration and desires, and romantic failures. Compelling though these explanations are, they do not help to explain why young people everywhere, faced with the same kind of existential crises, do not take their lives in comparable numbers or, indeed, why they utilize particular—and very gendered—methods of harming and/or killing themselves. In this chapter, I explore how South Indian notions of personhood—which, in turn, lead to particular understandings and experiences of agency—might have an impact on how and whether people kill themselves. I also attempt to situate these local explanations of personhood and agency in the wider context of a contemporary, industrializing India, and, in some measure, to analyze the interplay between the two.

Bethany

As a self-established and self-run leprosy colony, Bethany, the field site on which this chapter draws, differs in many respects from the villages constituting the part of coastal Andhra Pradesh that surrounds it. When people began settling there in the 1950s, the community was a squatter settlement of cured patients discharged from a nearby mission hospital, where most of them had been converted to Christianity from Hinduism or (less often) Islam. Under half the current population of around 1,000 people has ever been infected with leprosy. With caste differences eroded both by the shared experience of leprosy, religious conversion and geographical displacement that movement to the hospital had entailed, inter-caste marriages within the village—unlike elsewhere—were, and remain, commonplace (see Staples 2007). Given these notable differences, one might well question the wider relevance of this community's experiences of suicide, but, as my focus on the topic over two field visits in 2007 and 2009 revealed, many of the explanations

given for suicide attempts—and the kind of language used to describe them—were remarkably similar to those being expressed in India more generally. So were the methods used, with marked differences along gender lines. Although statistics relating to suicide are notoriously problematic (Staples 2012a; Hacking 1991; Marra and Orrù 1991) the figures matched the national picture too. According to my household survey, 31 people—15 men and 16 women—attempted suicide between 1991 and 2007, some of them several times. Seven had died as a consequence. Leprosy was not a prominent feature in any of these cases: only three of those who attempted suicide had ever had the disease, and even in these cases, occurring long after their diagnosis, the proximate causes were not disease related. Strikingly—and in common with other studies (e.g. Aaron, Joseph, Abraham et al. 2004: 1117–18)—the majority of the cases I encountered were among younger people, many of them born in the community. Their average age was 24, with an age range of 15 to 40.

Elsewhere (Staples 2012b; Staples and Widger 2012), I have drawn on my ethnographic data about suicide in Bethany to claim that suicidal behaviors—in which I include attempted suicides as well as acts that resulted in death but might not have been intended as such—should be analyzed not as an effect *either* of personal psychology *or* of social structure, but as social phenomena constituted within what Hacking (1988) called an "ecological niche." A "suicide niche"—within which suicide becomes a possibility of thought and action—is created through the convergence and interplay of a whole range of underlying conditions with the immediate contexts that appear to trigger the suicidal act. Many of the wider cultural conditions, I argue, are deeply embodied as what Bourdieu (1984) called "dispositions," and although such dispositions do not determine if and how suicidal acts occur, they do make suicide more or less likely as a response to particular stimuli, and suggest the forms those acts might take. When people engage in suicidal acts, they draw on embodied knowledge: knowledge which includes unconscious perspectives on the world that, in turn, were shaped by their socialization within a particular web of cultural circumstances. Given that such knowledge includes understandings about what it is to be a person, I go on to argue in this chapter that culturally specific notions of personhood and agency might also have mileage in understanding suicidal behavior in India.

I begin, then, with three case histories—chosen for their typicality as well as for their particularities, and fortified with the testimonies of others—which I shall then go on to analyze in relation to the questions I posed earlier in relation to personhood, agency and socio-political change.

Case I: Ratnam

Ratnam, the 18-year-old son of leprosy-affected parents, was in his final year of a private, English medium college when he drank poison. The college principal, he said, had been putting pressure on him to pay his school fees, but his father, Jonah, had been slow to come up with the money, and he felt embarrassed. "Everyone in

the school, my classmates as well as the teachers, all knew we were behind with the fees payments," he said, "and I was ashamed. How could I face them?" He stopped attending his classes as a consequence and, when his father found out, he was angry and hit him.

"I'd told him I'd pay later, when I had the money," Jonah said when I interviewed him separately. "But when we found out that he'd stopped attending college altogether I was furious and yes, I beat him. But I can understand now how he was suffering. They were shaming him at college, and I wouldn't leave him be at home. What could he do?"

After taking a beating from his father, Ratnam went to the rear of the house to take a bath. He was feeling angry, humiliated, and unable to think of a way out of the situation in which he had become embedded. "It wasn't fair," he said. "It was because my father didn't pay that I had stopped going to classes, but it was also my father who beat me for not going!" He then spotted a bottle of insecticide on the wall outside the bathroom. His father had bought it to feed the sweet lime tree that grew at the front of their house. Ratnam opened the bottle, downed about half of it, and finished his bath. "I wasn't thinking," he said, "but I wanted to die." A close friend of his in the village had drunk the same brand of insecticide three months earlier—apparently from an older, more lethal batch—and had not survived, so Ratnam was aware of the potential consequences, even if he was not considering them at that moment. By the time he came out he was groaning from a burning sensation in his chest, and his mother, noticing that the pesticide bottle was no longer on the wall, guessed what had happened and called for her husband to come quickly. Jonah, trained as a paramedic, raced to the back of the house, grabbed hold of him and forced one of his fingers down Ratnam's throat, causing him to vomit. They then took him to the local doctor who referred them on to a specialist hospital in the next town, where he was treated and spent a couple of weeks recovering. According to his father, his treatment cost Rs80,000: the equivalent of his salary for nearly two years.

"All my relatives came to visit me and there was a lot of weeping," Ratnam remembered. "My father asked me why I did it, and he was understanding when I explained. The college principal and others knew we hadn't paid my fees so I felt shamed, and then I came home and got a beating as well. I didn't know what to do to make things better, and that's why I drank from the bottle. He didn't shout at me so much or beat me after that, and he made sure the school fees were paid."

Jonah concurred with this account: "After it happened, every time I got angry with him about something I found myself looking at his face to see if he was thinking of doing it again," he said. "He threatened to drink poison again during an argument a while later, and neither I nor his mother slept that night: we watched him continuously to check he wasn't doing anything. I kept saying to him, don't think it's necessary to kill yourself—there are always other things you can do when you aren't happy."

"There was another boy in our lane who went to the bazaar and bought the same kind of poison just two weeks after Ratnam did. It was Ratnam who found

his body. I think he'd thought he could drink it as a threat too, like Ratnam had done, but it didn't work in his case, he was dead before they got to the hospital. There were others, too, that year." Each new death reinforced, for Jonah and his wife, the risk their son was under, and it certainly shaped their behavior towards him. As well as paying Ratnam's school fees, they also ensured he got the training he wanted, and paid the necessary bribes to secure him a job with the police force. "Now he's well-settled and has what he wanted," said Jonah, "so now he's calm."

Case II: Khadeja

Khadeja, a Sunni Muslim who later converted to Christianity, was diagnosed with leprosy when she was around 13 and, although the only signs of the disease on her body were a couple of discreet patches, her parents were concerned that her marital chances, and those of her siblings, would be negatively affected if word got out. Her father knew a much older man who, although married for several years, had been unable to produce any children with his wife. Offering Khadeja to him as a second wife seemed like a solution for both families: Khadeja might provide the children the couple so far lacked, while at the same time being taken off her parents' hands. "I'm poor," she remembered her father saying when he took her to the man's house. "I don't have money for a dowry, and you've been marked with leprosy, which makes it even harder. This is a good man, he's my friend, and he's suffering because he has no children. Marry him and you'll both be happy."

As it transpired, however, it was not a happy arrangement for any of the parties involved. "Our husband wasn't rich but had a little land and some savings," Khadeja said, "and his first wife was worried that if I bore a son, everything would be directed to him. A son might look after me and his father when he was grown-up, but what would become of her?" Khadeja claimed that when she became pregnant shortly after marriage, the first wife caused the death of her unborn baby by poisoning her food. "At the start, she would cook and eat after her husband, and I would eat what was left over," Khadeja explained. "But when I became pregnant, she started feeding me before her. I thought she was being kind to me, even though she still didn't help me with the other chores—like carrying the water—so after a while I became suspicious. And after a few days, the baby stopped moving inside me. When I went to see the midwife, she asked me whether I had wanted an abortion and if that was why I had taken the medicine to cause it. But I hadn't taken anything, and that's when I realized what she had done. She denied it, but I know what happened."

"With the baby already dead inside me, the delivery was also difficult, and the doctor thought I might also die. He wanted to remove my womb to be sure he saved me, but my mother, who had come, refused to let him. She said it would be better for me to be dead than to be alive and barren. What would be the use of that? The doctor was furious with her, but she wouldn't shift."

She survived, but the tensions between the three parties in the marital home were even worse when she returned from the hospital. "Our husband fought with

his first wife all the time: she accused him of loving me more than her, and I felt bad that I had made both of them so unhappy. Sometimes, after she had been blaming him, he would also lament the fact that he had married two women, would say it had been a mistake. 'Perhaps I should send her out,' he'd say about me, 'or kill myself. But to live like this is not good.'"

Khadeja was hurt by this, and said she felt powerless to improve the situation for either of them. That was the immediate background to her first suicide attempt: during a row about her presence, she ran from the house, picked up a can of kerosene and started drinking it. "I didn't plan it," she said when I asked her. "I drank quickly and out of emotion, but as soon as I had done it I felt physically terrible. My throat was burning." Although her husband and his first wife did not see what was going on, one of their neighbors did. She intervened, made Khadeja drink tamarind water to soothe her pain, and helped her as she vomited back the kerosene. She was ultimately unharmed.

Although her action caused a distraction from the immediate argument, it did not offer a long-term solution, so Khadeja decided to run away and throw herself in front of a train. "I had drunk kerosene and it hadn't worked, and I had no access to pesticides, so what else could I do? I wanted to die. I took off my jewelry and anything else he had given me, left it all there and went out in a sari my mother had given me. As a Muslim woman I didn't usually leave the house, so I didn't even know where the station was. But I asked directions from another woman, went there, and got down on to the track. The platform came up to my chest, and the train was about to come."

"But then a leprosy patient on the platform called out that there was a girl on the tracks, and he and several others ran over and pulled me up. I struggled against them but they were stronger than I was. "Didn't you see the train?" they said, and I said, "Yes, I wanted to die!" Then I told them my story: that if I went home to my parents' house they would suffer for it, and I would take the blame, but that I couldn't live with my husband and his other wife like that either. So they kept me with them on the station, and then they took me back with them a couple of days later to the leprosy colony they came from. They talked to the Elders about me and said they could arrange my marriage to another patient. I agreed, and that's what happened."

Her second marriage, however, was also difficult. Ravi was frequently violent towards her, physically and verbally, especially when he had been drinking. "One time," she said, "he had been speaking aggressively to me, using bad language, and it made me weep. I was from a Muslim background, I behaved modestly, and I wasn't used to going out of the house much. But he used to want me to go with him to the cinema, to put his arm around my shoulder, and I didn't like it. When I shied away from him he became very angry, started hitting me, and I didn't know what to do. So, this one time, when he was shouting, using vulgar words against me, I got so upset I just grabbed the kerosene and poured it over me. He grabbed the matches from me, stood back and lit one: 'Okay, I'll burn you then!' he shouted, but then he threw the match on the ground and poured a drum

of water over my head. 'Not in my house,' he said. 'If that's what you want, do it away from here.'"

Again, she said she had not premeditated her actions—even though they followed a well-worn cultural pattern for women attempting to kill themselves in India—and she had, she said, initially intended to die. "When I was a second wife, I always used to think that if I could be a man's only wife, I would be much happier. And when I was brought here, I'd said to the Elders, I want to marry someone who will show me love and who will respect my parents. But things were just as bad, so what could I do?" Lots of women who threatened suicide in Bethany, as I explored elsewhere (Staples 2012b), would do so by lifting the kerosene bottle or shaking the matchbox, sometimes—in the immediate absence of the correct props—even mimicking the act of striking a match as a warning about what they might do if pushed any further. So powerful, so widely understood was the imagery that it was usually sufficient to defuse a conflict situation. Calming an inflamed state of affairs with the threat of real fire, however, was a high risk strategy: if the other party was too slow to act or insufficiently moved to want to prevent it, or if the woman concerned got carried along with the momentum of the act, she could—and sometimes did—end up dead. Whether such a death might be classified as an accident or a suicide is a moot point: the fact that the women concerned often said that death was a better option than the *status quo* suggests to me that it was something in between the two.

Although in Khadeja's case Ravi was still angry at the moment of the kerosene incident, life did start to improve afterwards. He was more wary of upsetting her, and she, as Khadeja phrased it, got better at listening to and understanding her husband and his needs, so there was gradually less conflict between them. She later had two daughters by him and, although he still drank sometimes, he had now calmed down. "And I've also become bolder," she said. "I can fight back now, so I'm not driven to trying to kill myself!"

Case III: Arjun and Mariamma

Arjun and Mariamma had, according to Mariamma's account, fallen in love and conspired to convince their parents to let them marry. Both of them lived in the leprosy colony, both of them were the healthy children of leprosy-affected parents. Her family was agreeable, and although his parents were less so, they eventually conceded that he could marry her in a couple of years when his degree had been completed. According to Arjun's family, however, it was Mariamma rather than Arjun who had been pushing for the marriage: "He wasn't interested," Arjun's sister told me, "but Mariamma phoned, sent letters, and pressed him and pressed him. Finally, she said that if he didn't marry her she would kill herself, so he agreed."

"We weren't happy about marrying him to her—we'd heard she had a bad reputation in the village, and we wanted Arjun to concentrate on his education—but a meeting was called by her parents, and the Elders were keen that we should

announce their engagement. So, under pressure, and once they'd agreed that the wedding could wait until Arjun's studies were complete, we agreed to the match."

Mariamma, who had already dropped out of school in anticipation of her marriage, went to stay with relatives in the close-by city of Vijayawada. The couple kept in contact by phone while she was away, until one day she called him in tears and said she needed to call off the wedding. "She said she'd had an illegal connection [i.e. sexual intercourse] with her brother-in-law," Arjun's sister told me. "She was ashamed about it, too ashamed now to marry Arjun, so said that she planned to kill herself instead. I went there to meet her and begged her not to go back on the marriage arrangement. We'd had an engagement party for them already, taken photographs and videos—how could we just call the whole thing off? I told Mariamma that her name would be spoiled, that she'd not find another boy in the village willing to take her after what had happened, so she needed to go ahead with the wedding."

Mariamma was apparently insistent, however, that under the circumstances she could no longer marry Arjun, so, back in the colony, his family called a general body meeting to make a public complaint about her behavior. "We had to settle the matter, no?" Arjun's sister went on, "so we explained that she had had a sexual relationship with another boy, and that's why she wanted to call off the marriage. She was called there too, and admitted what had happened, and Arjun said okay, I don't want to marry her anyway." The Elders, she said, had recommended they wait until things had calmed down: "'Don't worry,' they said, 'no one is married yet, just keep the matter pending for some time.'" According to Mariamma, however—who didn't allude to her relationship with another boy when I interviewed her—the meeting was humiliating. "The Elders used vulgar words against me in public," she said, "Arjun's family was rude about me, and my parents—after the meeting—also blamed me for everything that had happened. They said I'd stopped my education unnecessarily, and had spoiled my own life. I was very upset. What could I do?"

"After the meeting I went back to the house, went to the cabinet and took all the tablets I could find—leprosy medicines, pain killers, anything that was there. My parents were upset, and I thought it would be better for everyone if I was dead."

After taking the medicines, she fell asleep, waking up a while later feeling sick and finding it hard to breathe. "I couldn't open my eyes properly and it felt like there was a weight on my head," she said, but her parents—who had noticed that the tablets were missing—kept shaking her to remain conscious. "I vomited, and they saw tablets in my vomit, so they rushed me to the hospital in the next town, where I had my stomach pumped, and was left to rest for five or six days."

"My parents," she said, "were relieved that I had survived, even though they were upset about what had happened over Arjun. And I felt glad that God had saved me, but there had been no other way. It had been my parents' ambition to educate me, and they had struggled financially to put me through intermediate. I'd spoiled that chance by falling in love, and now even that option had been spoiled. No-one's ambitions were fulfilled."

Once Mariamma had taken the pills, her parents' anger was also diverted onto Arjun's family. "They came and shouted that it was us who had spoiled their daughter's life," recalled Arjun's sister. "But Arjun had only ever agreed to marry her in the first place because she'd threatened to kill herself if he didn't, and now look at what had happened! He heard all this, thought he'd be blamed for what had happened to Mariamma and would be made to marry her anyway, so he also went and took tablets!"

Unlike Mariamma, however, Arjun swallowed the tablets dramatically and in public, standing and yelling in the front of his house, and he was soon surrounded by neighbors and family. They forced him to vomit and gave him tamarind water to drink, and then took him on to the hospital to have his stomach pumped. "If I'd run away," Arjun said, "the problem would have remained unresolved. Why should I cause trouble for so many people? If I die, it will only be me who is affected. That's how I felt. If I had given in and married Mariamma, our lives would have been very difficult too."

Discussion

Although the instances outlined above are not representative of every case I recorded in the community, between them they account for a wide range of the proximate causes attributed to suicide, the methods used and the language used to talk about them. The cases showed in general that young people, boys in particular, engaged in suicidal behavior when reality failed to meet their expectations: when their parents failed to finance the training courses of their desires, for example, or even, in one case, when a boy's parents refused to buy him a mobile phone. Older men were more likely to attempt suicide in response to unsurmountable debt (see, e.g., Jeromi 2007; Mohanty 2005): there were only a few cases in the village but many reported in the local area. Both young men and women attempted suicide in response to failed love affairs, unrequited love or parental opposition to their proposed unions,[4] and women, especially, threatened to take their own lives in response to acts or threats of what came to be seen as unbearable violence, usually perpetrated by husbands or their mothers-in-law. And while men mostly drank pesticide or, in a few cases, hanged themselves, women were much more likely to use kerosene and the threat of self-immolation. Even relatively unpremeditated acts of suicide, then, appear to conform to social rules; well-worn blueprints that ensure they are understood in particular ways by those left behind.[5] Responses likewise followed established patterns: immediate first aid or preventive action was taken—fingers down throats, tamarind water or buttermilk offered—a rush

4 As elsewhere: see, for example, Shanshan Du's account of "love suicide" among the Lahu (2002).

5 See also Hacking (2002) on how suicide is "made up" in culturally specific ways, suicide methods even becoming "symbols of national character" (2002: 112).

to the hospital and, if they survived, their alternative desires—what had been framed by those engaging in suicidal behaviors as the *only* acceptable alternative to death—were met.

In this sense, it might be argued that those involved in the vortex of relationships within which suicide acts took place were social *actors* rather than *agents*: persons so constrained in their capacities to respond to social stimuli that they behaved in pre-determined ways. Durkheim's (1970) finding that suicide rates vary very little within any given society—except at times of social upheaval—supports such a perspective on suicide. Although such an analysis usefully exposes suicide as a social rather than a purely individual act, it does not adequately account for the complex relationships involved in an attempt at suicide, and leaves intact the implied split between agency and structure as non-compatible categories. If, however, agency might be broadly understood, as Ahearn defines it, as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (2001: 112), then we might argue instead that suicide, while it conforms to culturally familiar styles and responds to particular kinds of social problems, is nevertheless always more than a mechanical, unthinking response. In all the cases described here, those involved took particular actions at particular points along the trajectories of their suicide narratives, but although they did not always act entirely deliberatively, they always recognized the possibility of more than one outcome, and often tailored their actions, consciously or otherwise, in ways that would increase the likelihood of their aims being met.

So far, though, there is nothing obviously "Indian" about the general details of any of this: people everywhere might be said to behave as agents within, more or less, the confines of the social contexts in which they are embedded.[6] Those contexts, of course, will vary cross-culturally. Middle class Western European youth may not consider themselves as constrained in their choices of partner as the South Asian people I worked with so may be less likely to attempt suicide over it, for example, and the threat of suicide may be less effective in persuading a reluctant paramour to marry because it is considered less acceptable as a strategic device than it was among the people I worked with. Despite these differences, however, in both of these broadly defined contexts we might identify relatively bounded, stable social agents behaving in accordance with local logics about suicide. While this is the case, by reading the examples above in relation to the models of South Asian personhood I outlined at the start of this chapter, some particularities—that *do* suggest my informants conceived of themselves in different ways to, say, Western Europeans—start to emerge.

For one thing, although in all the examples outlined above, as well as the other cases I explored, those concerned behaved as more or less conscious agents, they *also* attributed agency for their actions more widely than their individual selves. Suicide, in common with other actions, was seen not so much as an active decision but as something that happened because of wider causes or the actions

6 This is, for example, an argument which finds fit with the "structured action" approach deployed in Scourfield, Fincham, Langer and Shiner (2011).

of others. I became acutely aware of this general tendency in attributing causality when I was transcribing the recording of life history interviews I conducted, over the course of several weeks, with my research assistant as part of the process of writing his biography (Staples 2011b; 2014). The phrase "What could I do?" ("*nenu emi cheyagalanu*?" in Telugu)—usually delivered with a shrug, a wry smile and a throwing up of his hands—was perhaps the most common of all his expressions. The question was clearly rhetorical rather than a reflection on what course of action might now be taken, strongly suggesting instead a perceived lack of personal agency or, at least, the desire to convey that impression. Whether it was accounting for extra-marital affairs with village women, hitting a policeman over the head with an iron bar or gambling his money away at the race track, he spoke of things happening or being done *to* him rather than *by* him as an agent of change. He was helped in this—as were my other informants—by linguistic categories. In Tamil, his mother tongue, emotions are often expressed intransitively, so rather than saying "I am afraid," for example, the Tamil "ennakku payam" literally translates as "to me there is fear."[7] Telugu, the language most widely spoken in Andhra, works in a similar way. Although my research assistant had never attempted suicide, having become aware of what I thought was a line designed to change the subject and protect himself from accusations of bad behavior—which, of course, it also was—I realized that most of those I interviewed who had attempted suicide used the same phrase at some point during their narratives, often repeatedly. People presented themselves as compelled to act by forces beyond the boundaries of their individual selves, and although, as was the case with my research assistant, this may have been a way of *representing* their behavior rather than a straightforward description of how they understood and experienced it, the very fact that such an explanation has currency suggests a wider cultural acceptance of it.

Elsewhere, there are examples of suicide being read much more explicitly as an act carried out by agents other than the target of the action. Bohannan (1960: 177), for example, is not alone in his collection on *Suicide and homicide in Africa* in reporting informants who always attribute what others would call suicide to witchcraft or possession, re-defining the act as murder.[8] Comparable instances are noted by the other authors in this volume. Beatriz Reyes-Foster, for example, notes in her chapter that in Yucatan, Mexico, suicide is frequently attributed to demonic power, while Ludek Broz (also this volume) explains that, in Altai, part of the Russian Federation, all death, suicides included, are seen as destiny, suggesting limited personal agency. There were cases I recorded in Bethany, too, where the person who attempted suicide was seen as possessed or, as in the case of Wesley,

7 I am grateful for David Mosse (per. com 1999) for pointing this out during discussions about my original 1999–2000 fieldwork.

8 Attributing suicide to possession is not particular to non-Western countries: see Lambert and Owens (2012) for an example of how male suicide in England is often attributed, albeit more implicitly, to something akin to possession by the wives of men who kill themselves.

a boy who hanged himself, "under the influence of the devil." The "evil eye" was also often cited as a cause of particular incidences of ill-fortune, manifest through the glances of those suspected of being witches. When my friend's small daughter fell asleep on the back of a rickshaw and fell off, being hit—luckily not fatally—by a motorbike, the cause was attributed neither to the fact that she had fallen asleep nor to the motor cyclist, but to the fact that a particular woman had cast her eye over her as the rickshaw crossed the boundary between the village and the main road into town. Such explanations were not used very commonly to explain suicide attempts—except, it seemed, in instances where a more rationalistic explanation could not be found—but most cases were nevertheless accounted for in relation to the actions of a wider network of people than the individual concerned. The shift in causal explanations away from supernatural agents and on to natural ones might also be read as an indication of the increasing importance afforded to the neo-liberal economy in contemporary India, within which people saw their futures as dependent on successful engagement with the market place.

In Ratnam's case, for example, he said "I wasn't thinking" when he drank the poison—implying that an unidentified other might have taken hold—and his father and the school principal were both implicated in what had happened. Khadeja likewise used the "What could I do?" formulation—dispersing agency, and personal responsibility, away from a bounded self—and, in common with the other attempts at self-immolation I encountered, her final suicide attempt might be compared more to a dance—within which both partners have roles to play—than a solo act. While the performative associations of a dance might suggest the performers fulfill the roles of social *actors* rather than *agents*, the capacity in many dances for improvisation—for agentive expression and symbolic activity dispersed between the dancers—renders the metaphor an apt one to work with here. And while I would not wish to detract from the fact that many women's deaths by burning were thought to be murders portrayed as suicide, the fact that acts of self-immolation were seldom carried out privately or pre-meditated and that they usually required the input of both parties involved further mirror performances in which the moves of one dancer respond to those of his or her partner.

Of course, in dispersing agency, in both these cases the suicide attempter is also using the act to attribute responsibility to other persons and to deflect culpability from his or her own action. This is also clear in the third case, of Arjun and Mariamma. She, on the one hand, attempts first to get her own way by threatening she will take her life, then, when everything goes wrong, she attempts to detract from her shame by taking tablets. Arjun, too, is active in this particular dance, however. Recognizing that he will be blamed for Mariamma's death if her attempt is successful, he counters her action by taking an overdose himself. In this case, more than either of the others explored here, there are deliberative attempts to use suicide threats to affect particular outcomes rather than simply immediate escapes, in a social context where others are commonly blamed for the deaths of others. For example, in another dispute over lovers' plans to marry—shortly before the final denouement in Arjun and Mariamma's case—Krishnamohan, whose daughter told

him she had fallen in love with a boy and wanted to marry him, had angrily gone to the boy's house and publicly beaten him in the street. Although at that point Krishnamohan was seen by most as reasonable in his actions—he was simply defending the reputation of his daughter and his family—when the boy drank pesticide after the attack and died, so strong was the opinion that Krishnamohan had been responsible for the death that he was banished from the village. In several other cases, girls had conceded to marriages they had not originally wanted to enter into because their fathers made public threats, or attempts, to commit suicide. My informants were acutely aware of the risk that they might be implicated in the suicide of another person and also, by extension, of the communicative force of threatening suicide themselves. Paradoxically, then, it is the very shifting of responsibility for suicide attempts *beyond* those who attempt it—and in so doing displacing, or at least concealing, their own agency—that suicide attempters might simultaneously shore up and exercise agency. The boy who wanted to marry Krishnamohan's daughter might well not have intended to die, but his bold act in drinking the poison nevertheless had powerful implications for Krishnamohan.

While there is evidence that suicide behavior was shaped by pan-Indian notions of personhood, then—with agency seen as dispersed across the fluid boundaries that exist between people—many of the cases I encountered might also be attributed in some degree to what older people in the village identify as a growing individualism among the younger generation, a trend that might also be associated with Christianity as the dominant faith in the village, even though no-one spoke to me about it in those terms. Ratnam's suicide attempt, for example, came about as a direct response to his personal ambitions not being fulfilled: the same reason offered by most of the boys in the village who drank pesticide. They did so, they told me, because their parents—from another generation for whom education was less important—had not found the money for the training courses they wanted to undertake. Such aspirations arose from the convergence of several factors: unlike elsewhere in the immediate neighborhood, there had been a steady flow of western volunteers passing through the village since the mid-1980s and, because many of their parents went begging to major cosmopolitan cities, a flow of goods and ideas that had yet to penetrate surrounding farming communities quite so thoroughly. A narrative of personal achievement is also consistent with a Christian, Protestant ethic, embodied more in the community's younger generation than in the earlier settlers, who had mostly grown up as Hindus. In several senses, then, Bethany's youth had what were described as very modern aspirations. In common with other Indian communities, however, many of the old certainties—such as the prospect of a government job for life that one might also pass on to one's offspring—were being erased by the process of economic liberalization that began in 1991. Not only had parents in past generations seen themselves as better placed to help maneuver their offspring into such jobs (just as long as they could borrow or accumulate enough money to pay the necessary bribes), but their children were more willing to submit to the careers (and, indeed, marriages) that their parents suggested

for them. For many, as it still was for those growing up in the villages around the leprosy colony, that meant subsistence farming on rented or family land. An emphasis on *individual* achievement—which Bethany's younger generation had been embodying almost imperceptibly for most of their lives—was peaking at a time when such achievements were becoming out of reach for all but the most socio-economically well-placed. One of the consequences was an upsurge in the numbers of younger people attempting suicide, acts which, in order to make sense of them within the community, were framed in more familiarly dividualistic terms.

Finally, something that also struck me—and I have resisted it until now because it seems to me that such arguments are over-used—was that the suicidal behaviors I witnessed might also be interpreted as a way of forcing something akin to a *rite de passage* to occur. The suicidal act—whatever its intention—creates an immediate hiatus in the *status quo*: a phase analagous to the liminal or transitional phase of van Gennep's *rites de passage* (van Gennep 1977; Turner 1967). He describes this as the period betwixt and between states, during which one has left one place or state but has not yet entered or joined the next (and, in many cases, might never do so). In a straightforward sense, the stage between undertaking the initial act and the outcome—often marked by a literal separation from the home to the hospital—might mark the passage between life and death. More commonly, it also marks an interruption between what is perceived as an impossible or unbearable situation and the potential resolution of that situation—whether by death or by action on the part of others. It might mean, as in Ratnam's case, simply paying out for a college course. In cases attributed to love affairs it might unite a couple in cases where one side has been unwilling, or, if it does not, it might at least redistribute the shame of being rejected, as in Mariamma's case. In the case of the battered or wronged wife, like Khadeja, the brandishing of the matchbox or the kerosene bottle likewise results either in the attacker backing off or a wall of flames literally coming between them. In either case, release from a situation characterized by helplessness is affected, and even if death by immolation is more immediately painful than the verbal and physical attacks of one's husband and his family, it is at least more absolute. In Khadeja's final case it marked the beginning of an improvement in relations with her husband; for Ratnam it meant school fees paid and, eventually, a career in the police force; and for Arjun and Mariamma—whose case is perhaps more ambiguous—it resolved both the issue of the girl's humiliation and the blame that would have been placed on the boy. Those who engage in acts of "death making" (to borrow Chua's term, this volume), although they may not plan their actions ahead of them happening, already embody the knowledge of what such acts can achieve: they can see beyond the immediate ramifications of drinking the poison or threatening to strike the match—even if the potential outcomes are radically different. In that sense, those who engage in such actions are agents. That they do so in situations of desperation where there appear to be no other alternatives suggests that such agency is heavily tempered with social constraint.

Concluding Remarks

To end with a question I posed myself earlier in this chapter: in relation to suicide, does it make sense to think in terms of individual, rather than a more displaced, agency in the South Asian context? My answers—rather unhelpfully, but typically anthropologically—are both yes *and* no. Those engaged in suicide in India constitute themselves—and are constituted by others—*both* as individual agents who undertake unilateral acts intended, at the moment they occur, to result in particular outcomes; *and* as dispersed, fluid dividuals, where intent and consequences of a suicidal act are situated across a number of social agents—including parents and family members, spirits, and the evil eye. As Busby's (1997) formulation, summarized by Carsten, has it, in India "persons are both connected through substantive flows *and* complete in themselves" (2004: 128, my italics).

This suggests that a fluid notion of personhood is not incompatible, as I was guilty of thinking of it as in first trying to make sense of my ethnographic material, with a more personal notion of agency: an understanding which also enables us to countenance that Western so-called individuals are, beyond the capitalist rhetoric that overshadows their depiction, more dispersed and interconnected than we caricature them as being. Indeed, in contemporary India there is an apparent paradox in the recognition that, on the one hand, culpability for a suicide is dispersed between multiple agents and away from the suicidal person; and, on the other—precisely because that culpability has been shifted to others—recognition by those attempting suicide that their actions have the power to affect those others in particular ways. Such tension occurs, I would argue, in response to tensions that have arisen in India over the last 20 years on the ground between models of personhood that favor a dispersed, relational agency and "modern" notions valorizing the individual self that have become a possibility of thought as a consequence of the economic liberal reforms that began in earnest in the 1990s. This is not to suggest that "individualism" will inevitably triumph over "dividualism" in the South Asian context; modernities, after all, are embraced and shaped in a multiplicity of ways cross-culturally. It is, however, to argue that my interpretation of suicide in India as an expression both of the relational, refracted nature of agency *and* a sometimes individually agentive act—even more so than it is commonly perceived as in the West, because of its power to affect change—is a possibility created by the particular circumstances of this historical moment. Suicide in India—and in most other places too—is an act in which continually changing culturally embodied values *and* individual action come together.

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Chapter 3
The Lonely Un-Dead and Returning Suicide in Northwest Greenland

Janne Flora[1]

During the late summer of 2009, Greenlandic newspapers reported of a violent attack on a woman. She and her husband had been on the land near their home village hunting for reindeer. At one point, after her husband had walked ahead, she was suddenly pushed forward, causing her to fall face down onto the ground. Immediately she felt the weight of a body on her back, weighing her down as she struggled to get back on her feet. A smelly hand covered her mouth, so she could not yell for her husband to come to her rescue. She struggled and managed to wrestle herself back on her feet. Gasping for air, she tried to scream for help, but was stopped by a hard kick to her stomach. It was then she noticed the boots of her attacker. They were the traditional kind, made of seal fur, old and worn out. A mask, also made of seal fur, covered his face. He wore a light blue Helly Hansen anorak, distressed and soiled, but decorated with white bird feathers. She realized that her attacker was not a normal person. He was a *qivittoq*. Overcome by fear, she tried again to scream for help, but her voice had gone soundless. The *qivittoq* then tried to remove her backpack but, somehow, she managed to push him to the ground. As her fear grew into anger, she screamed her husband's name as loud as she could. It was only then that the *qivittoq* loosened his grip from her, jumped to his feet and escaped in strides longer than a normal human could ever muster.

Until a few decades ago in Greenland, after eighteenth-century missionaries had banished the practice, it was not uncommon for an irreversibly angered or disappointed person, usually male, to turn his back on society and permanently walk into the wilderness (Kleivan et al. 1985: 21; Mikkelsen 1998; Parbøl 1955). Here, after a period of isolation he would undergo a transformation and become

1 The research for this chapter was supported by the Danish Research Agency between 2003 and 2005. Subsequent fieldwork was supported by the Carlsberg Foundation, Denmark. I am grateful to my family and friends in the region of the Island for their patience and friendship. Without their time and care, this chapter would never be possible. Thanks also to Ludek Broz and Daniel Münster for hosting the Suicide and Agency workshop in Halle and for their as well as the reviewer's comments. Piers Vitebsky and regular members of the Magic Circle Seminar Group at SPRI in Cambridge have read and commented on previous drafts of this chapter. Ruth Horry kindly contributed the illustrations.

what is locally known as *qivittoq*. As a *qivittoq*, he would have lost his name(s), a key marker of human and social personhood, and he would have gained the ability to talk to animals, the gift of flight, invisibility, shape-shifting and extraordinary physical strength. Unlike ordinary human persons, he will live an unnaturally long (in some cases, un-dying) life in permanent and extreme loneliness (*kiserliorneq*), coming into human contact only to search for food, clothes, equipment and ultimately, vengeance for his (albeit self-imposed) banishment, by attacking or kidnapping humans.

The similarities between the figure of *qivittoq* and what is conventionally understood as suicide: the killing, or murder of the self by the self; has been commented on by several social scientists (Graburn 1969: 48; Lynge 1997: 18–19; Nuttall 1992: 188–9; Thorslund 1990: 126–30, 1991: 254–60, 1996: 77–8), and indeed by inhabitants of a northwest Greenlandic village—the Islanders. Both suicide and *qivittoq* can be seen as irreversible ways of self-detaching; at one and the same time as acts of despair and of agency; and both are surrounded by stigma, ambiguity, and liminality. Whereas the practice of "permanently walking onto the land," at least officially, has been abandoned, the suicide rates in Greenland have increased dramatically over the past decades. It is tempting to pursue the claim (cf. Thisted 1992) that the high suicide rate today is a "modern" version, or even replacement, of the abandoned *qivittoq* practice. However, as Greenlanders still regularly encounter *qivittut* today, talk about them, and, as demonstrated by the story above, report sightings and their attacks to the media and police, would overlook the point that the *qivittoq* character is very real, as real as the suicides that affect almost every extended family in some way. Unlawfulness and abandonment aside, like suicide, the *qivittoq* at least in theory, remains a potential way in which a human could self-detach.

I have argued elsewhere (Flora 2012) that the ambiguity of suicide, and our fascination with it, as researchers, policy makers, scientists and humans, is closely associated with the idea that its causality at one and the same time is unknowable and yet exists "out there" awaiting discovery. In turn, this chapter will consider both suicide and *qivittoq* as characters, or actors, of permanent self-detachment and ask not what causes suicide or *qivittoq*, but rather, towards whom or what the suicide and the *qivittoq* in their acts of self-detachment turn. The argument pursued here hinges upon the definition of suicide. If suicide (*imminortoq*) even in Greenland, is defined as the killing or murder of the self by the self, it is important to ask both "who" the self is, and, what murder, killing or (self-) detachment implies. Here, I will limit the discussion to discussing self-detachment within a general model of what happens to a person once he dies. Locally among Islanders and throughout the Inuit arctic generally, death offers a potential solution in the *return* (*uterpoq*) of the deceased's name(s) to one or more newborn relatives or community members. Almost every person is a partial reincarnation of at least one dead relative or community member, and every dead person, including those who die by suicide can thus usually expect to return. A *qivittoq*, on the other hand, is offered no such solution as his name-soul (*ateq)* is contaminated therefore not

usually returned. In the very few cases where a *qivittoq*'s name has been returned among Islanders, it has been with grave consequences.

The argument presented here is this: if death is acknowledged, characterized or made complete by the bestowal of one's name-soul onto another, then conventional suicide does not radically differentiate itself from any other form or death; whereas the "death" of the *qivittoq* appears sinister, obscure and incomplete; characteristics not entirely dissimilar to those regularly ascribed to death by suicide. Furthermore, if suicide is characterized as a way to permanently self-detach, to expel oneself from human life and the potentiality of human relatedness, then that of the *qivittoq*, converse to the suicide whose name returns, thus appears complete, total, and permanent. In other words, placing our conventional definition of suicide within the Greenlandic context of human relatedness thus appears to make the *qivittoq* more of a suicide, than suicide itself.

Suicide Rates and Ambiguity

Over the past decades suicide rates in Greenland, as elsewhere in the Arctic, have risen to epidemic heights.[2] These rates concern particularly young men in the age group 15–24 from the small villages where the population sometimes is as few as 50 people.[3] The most prevailing causal framework for explaining suicide in Greenland, is akin to Durkheim's model of "anomic suicide" (2002 [1897]). Being the first to associate social integration with suicide, Durkheim (2002 [1897]) argued that the anomic suicide rate varied inversely with the degree of social integration. Changes in society—religious, political, institutional as well as social—cause people to feel detached from society. Social controls have broken down and they leave people with little or no responsibility. Similarly, suicide in Greenland, like alcohol abuse,

2 Having recorded a total Greenlandic suicide rate of 3.0 (calculated per 100,000 over five years) in the years between 1900 and 1930, Bertelsen (1935) argued that most of these cases were most likely caused by serious mental illnesses. Exploding in the 1960s to a total rate of around 40.0 in 1972, and 90.0 in 1980, peaking at a total rate of over 120.0 in the mid 1980s (cf. Hicks 2007a: 31, 2007b: 265), the total suicide rate in Greenland declined and appeared to stabilize in the 1990s to around 100.0 (Hicks 2007a: 31). Comparatively, the total suicide rate in Denmark was around 13.0 increase with age, peaking at nearly 40.0 in 2009.

3 The East Greenlandic young male suicide rate peaked at 1500.0 (!) per 100,000 per year in the early 1990s (Hicks 2007a: 32). In the mid 1990s, the total suicide rate for men of any age was 160.0 while it was only a quarter of that for women. This is a trend we see in all age groups: male suicides dramatically outnumber female suicides. Regarding the age cohort, the Greenlandic suicide rate for the age group 15–19 in the years 1990–1998 was 50 times higher than the same age cohort in Denmark (Bjerregaard et al. 1995: 31; Lynge and Bjerregaard 2000: 4), and 40 times higher for the age cohort 15–24 (Hicks 2007b: 270). Whereas the male suicide rate in Denmark peaked around 40.0 in 2009 for elderly men, the male rate in West Greenland (excluding the country's capital, Nuuk) has remained at a rate of over 400.0 per year per 100,000 since the 1980s (Hicks 2007b: 268).

violence and child neglect, is explained as a product of rapid modernization, social change and acculturation (Berry 1985; Hicks 2007a, 2007b; Larsen 1990; Lynge 1985; Olsen 1985; Thorslund 1990a, 1996). Young men, as opposed to their female counterparts, are said to feel trapped between so-called modern and traditional forms of life. They are perceived as unable to cope with social or cultural change or the fact that their sisters, girlfriends and potential future wives, travel to cities to attain qualifications and educated husbands (from Denmark), while they remain behind, bound to a life of subsistence hunting and commercial fishing with few means, or even desire, to follow.[4] Other factors such as alcoholism, poor living conditions, lack of education, problematic family relations, all means and products of acculturation, all demonstrate statistical correlation to suicide (Bjerregaard et al. 1998: 155–6; Larsen 1990; Lynge 1985, 1994: 554; Thorslund 1990a).

There is merit to this causal explanation. The oppressive colonial history and Christianization of Greenland beginning in the eighteenth century, was followed by sudden forced closure and relocation of settlements and villages. The rapid and meticulous construction of an infrastructure similar to that of the Danish colonizers in the 1950s, when Greenland was included in the Danish constitution, brought about change and disruption at an unprecedented speed. There are, however, several slippages in these statistical frameworks, perhaps the most obvious one being its inability to explain why some people commit suicide, while others who grow up experiencing the same rapid change, acculturation and break-down of religious and social patterns, do not. Another crucial one is that these discourses *a priori* treat suicide as a "problem," which must be prevented rather than a problem, which communicates something, or deserves to be thought on. I do not extend this to suggest that suicide does not or ought not to pose a problem for Greenland politically or within the families who lose relatives to suicide. On the contrary. However, there has been a tendency in suicide research to ignore what suicide is or means, or which position suicide has within an entire spectrum of deaths and forms of self-detachment, and thus leaves unquestioned the presumed demarcation between life and death. Naturally, these are questions that statistics cannot account for, just like they cannot account for the actuality of the *qivittoq* or how deceased return through their names which are bestowed onto newborns. And finally, suicide rates will inevitably tell a disproportionate story when the rates are recalculated into actual numbers, giving the impression that suicides are "more recurrent" than they actually may be in actual numbers. The high rates of

4 The rapid modernization of Greenland has brought with it stark changes in family patterns and gender roles, and thus also in many cases a geographical separation between the sexes, whereby women are statistically more likely to travel to attain education than men, while men tend to maintain "traditional" modes of subsistence hunting (Hamilton et al. 1996; Misfeldt et al. 1989; Sørensen 1993). However the other side of the coin also indicates that "traditional" modes of hunting and fishing in many areas is a viable source occupation for many men, precisely because their wives have professional qualifications and thus financial income to support the subsistence hunting activities of their partners.

suicide in Greenland (as elsewhere in the Arctic) continue to receive considerable attention by the media, politicians, and academic researchers from a range of disciplines, as well as workers in policy and social care. Each group tells their own story, and despite the great efforts taken by these various groups to create awareness and an open debate about suicide; suicide as a particular kind of self-detachment continues to be surrounded by a great amount of stigma, ambiguity and not least myth. The continued attention and reporting of suicide in the Arctic, we may suggest fuels the arguably stereotypical or mythical marriage between Inuit and suicide. This association is not a recent one. The idea, or myth, that suicide is something that Inuit not only do frequently, but also with great ease has a central place in the classic ethnographic literature. Several stereotypical depictions of "Inuit who commit suicide" speckle the ethnographic literature, discussing not so much how it happens, or indeed what it means, as much as that it happens with apparently great ease and frequency (Boas 1964 [1888]: 207; Freuchen 1962: 194–5; Weyer 1932: 248). Stevenson (2005) argues that many of these depictions are fictitious and served primarily to aid the romantic and Othering imagery of the Eskimo in the high north, struggling for survival against both against a harsh "nature," and indeed, against himself. In other words, depictions such as these could be to assist the colonial project of conquest and Christianization, or at least be taken as a commentary on the urgent need for outside intervention. Indeed, this is a perception still played out today, for example in a Danish television series,[5] where the Danish prime minister in a political quarrel with the Greenlandic head, argues that Greenland is still not ready for independence as the youth suicide rate remains the highest in the world.

Euro-American patterns of suicide however, Hacking argues (2002: 112), was not always a "timeless" option, but rather a historical artifact and the doing of a nineteenth-century obsession by French medics with the subject. A sudden rise in un-noble suicides across Europe allegedly deemed to be caused by "insanity" triggered great concern and French medics and statisticians thus began recording information on each accessible case of suicide. Nothing was irrelevant and every attainable fact about each corpse became important, and not least fascinating. All findings were recorded and became a statistic. Suicides thus became measurable. They were thought upon, discussed and reported, both creating a public discourse about suicide, and continually breathing new life to the search for causality. By the end of the nineteenth century there was so much information about European suicides that Durkheim attempted to measure social integration through suicide; but ultimately, Hacking argues (2002: 113), it created an entire ethos of "suicide behavior" surrounding the method, the time and place of death, and even the obligatory suicide note. Suicide as a form of behavior, has in other words become a ritualized act, carried out by actors whose reasoning, like the act itself, we imagine to be patterned and distinguishable from conventional deaths as ambiguous.

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5 *Borgen*: "Hundrede Dage" Season 1, Episode 4. first aired 17 October 2010, DR 1. Created by Adam Price for DR Fiktion.

During my initial time of research in a small village of one hundred and some people, here referred to as the Island in a large northwest Greenlandic municipality[6] between 2003 and 2005, I was repeatedly struck by how little people locally talked about suicide. This is not to suggest, however, that Islanders did not care, or were untouched by suicide. To the contrary, most people with whom I came into contact knew someone, a close or distant relative, who had committed or attempted suicide. However, the suicide epidemic I had assumed would greatly influence my fieldwork and actually be the focus of it, was simply not there. At least not how I had imagined it. During my initial time of field research, there were no occurrences of suicide. The most recent occurrence had taken place some years prior by a young man, whose fiancé had broken their engagement shortly before the suicide occurred. It was difficult for me to ascertain whether any connection between the two events, in the eyes of the Islanders, was more than coincidental. There were however several suicide attempts, some of which were repeated over the subsequent years. One attempt eventually proved terminal in 2010: a young woman, about whom it was said after-the-fact, had been unable to come to terms with a violent attack she had suffered as a young teenager. Prior to her suicide, she had however also lost first her mother and later her aunt to terminal illnesses. She had been very close to both and, others said, both before- and after-the-fact, that she found it difficult to cope with her grief and loneliness. To what extent either of these predicaments were what motivated this young woman's suicide, is difficult to know.

Part of our fascination with the subject of suicide, is perhaps owed to the idea that suicide can both be interpreted as an act of dignity and agency, but also as an act of utter despair. In addition, suicide is at least in the Christian tradition, deemed unnatural and an abomination. It is an objection to the idea that life is a divine gift and that it should be lived in earnest until it withers naturally or until God takes it. Drawing on her own experiences as an anthropologist of a suicide prevention program in Nunavut in the Canadian Arctic, Stevenson (2014) explores how this conundrum arises between suicide prevention workers who operate precisely from this ethos; and the suicidal youth who do not. Among the youth and Inuit more generally, she demonstrates, not only death but also suicide is also "naturalized" in the sense that death is considered an inevitable part of life. Death is in other words always a possibility, and to the suicidal youth in the program, a viable option. Stevenson suggests that this life-saving approach to suicide can be visualized as another, or continued, form of colonialism. It is a colonial, and I would add, distinctly Christian way of thinking about "tomorrow" within a world where "tomorrow" not only is unknown, but also entirely uncertain.

Where sociological considerations about suicide generally are founded on statistical data, anthropologists will be more prone to explore suicide in terms of human relationships, specific or general ones between human and sometimes nonhuman agents; even, as the case may be for suicide; where they appear absent.

6 All names of people and places have been disguised.

Considering suicide among the Netsilik in the Arctic for example, Balikci argues that suicide is caused by the "*lack of wider relatedness*" (1970: 168, original italics). Briggs (1985: 45) and the clinical psychiatrist, Lynge (1985: 58) both argue that suicide among Greenlanders seems to have to do with problems of bonding and the experience of a profound sense of loneliness. Both the suicide and the *qivittoq*, as characters, I argue have a place within the system of kinship and relatedness. Human relations, as we know, are rarely stable but are instead continually re-invoked, re-negotiated and reformed, often across blurred boundaries of the social and the biological (cf. Carsten 2000; Schweitzer 2000). This is particularly the case with Greenlandic kinship, where both the everyday re-invocation of relatedness, as well as the bestowal of names to infants, implicitly and explicitly draw upon and necessitate both categories. As we shall see however, as much as this system emphasizes ways to create and re-invoke relatedness itself, it also accentuates concepts of loneliness and longing as and employs these vehicles for relatedness. This is the case, particularly as we shall see, when we consider the naming practices, where the name of a person who has died an untimely or unexpected death—for example children and infants or those who die by accidents, homicide or suicide—tends to be returned in multiple infants to allow the bereaved to overcome their grief. The *qivittoq* on the other hand stands outside, as an antithesis of relatedness. Højer warns us that we as anthropologists are prone to perform an "anthropological trick" (2004: 43) by which we make the exterior interior through a process of becoming, or phrased differently, search for social relations between self and other, and invariably find them. In doing so, he argues, we also run the risk of making slight of the anxiety and uncertainty that runs through (or even render) those very relations real. Højer's concern is then to explore how the exterior is made and kept in a truly exterior position. Although it is important to bear in mind that however negative the relation is, it is nevertheless still a relation, the *qivittoq* nevertheless, I suggest, occupies exactly this position as an outsider, aggressor, with no potential to ever perform human relations or himself become a human relative, kin. In this relation thus, the exterior cannot be made interior. Humans on the other hand, have the usually unexplored potential to become *him*.

The Lonely *qivittoq*

From a historical perspective we know that both suicide and *qivittoq* (*qivittut* pl.), as two forms of self-detachment, coexisted at the arrival of the missionaries in the eighteenth century. Glahn's travel diaries from the 1760s state that he encountered both practices of *qivittoq*, that angered or disappointed individuals walked into the landscape, and suicide (Glahn 1921: 41, 60, 153). However, it was not until over 100 years later in 1883, that Hammer (1889: 22) made a typological connection between the two, and suggested that *qivittoq* is a kind of suicide. He did not encounter any suicides among the Inuit on his voyage, and thus wrote

that while suicide was completely unknown to Greenlanders, Greenlanders had the equivalent phenomenon of *qivittoq*.[7] Indeed, whether the two forms of self-detachment coexisted in some areas or not, a missionary would arguably regard the act of the *qivittoq*'s permanent self-imposed banishment as typologically similar to an act of suicide. Arguably, their attempt to stamp out the practice had more to do with the anti-social act itself than it did with an actual belief that the self-banished would survive the wilderness and transform into an un-dead being, a *qivittoq*. The argument could be made that today's suicide is the historical result of, at least officially, abandoning *qivittoq* practices and has become a modern equivalent or some kind of extension of *qivittoq* which is to say that one practice of extreme self-detachment has simply replaced another. When the suicide rates in Greenland exploded in the 1970s, Greenlandic poets and writers at the time located suicide within a combined discourse of modernization, colonialism, Danish political supremacy on the one hand and *qivittoq* on the other. Suicide was seen as motivated by the same sort of problem facing the young man, namely that there was no room for him in society and that the only solution for him was to re-enact *qivittoq* by committing suicide. But viewing suicide as a form of *qivittoq* necessitated that poets and writers re-evaluated *qivittoq* who previously had turned his aggression towards his family and loved ones (and their future descendants), now instead would turn his anger towards modern society and the political status quo of which he had become a colonial victim (Thisted 1992: 147) and ultimately direct his anger towards others against himself.

For the Islanders I know, there seems no greater torment imaginable than to live in loneliness. Someone who "lives in loneliness," a *kiserliortoq*, is someone who is without family, friends or even acquaintances. There is no such person in the Village, because such a person would essentially be a nonhuman, a non-living being. The only person, who might approximate a person who lives in loneliness, is a stranger. However, in order to truly achieve a life in loneliness, a person should fully detach from the community, walk into the wilderness with the intention to never return and in this way become a *qivittoq*. Having detached from society, the *qivittoq* would initially undergo a "trial-period" of a few days, where he would be unable to eat or drink, as all prey he would attempt to catch would escape and each stream from which he would attempt to drink would run dry (cf. Parbøl 1955: 457–8). During these days, he would be free to return to human society at any point. Likewise, relatives searching for him, would also able to bring him home, should they discover him. After this initial period, the *qivittoq* would cross the irreversible threshold of losing his human names and

7 For the early missionaries, suicide and *qivittoq* practices and beliefs almost certainly presented a string of delicate problems. One of the earliest literary mentions of *qivittut* is in the 1735 diaries of missionary Hans Egede's sons. Here the *qivittoq* is mentioned briefly in a case of marital disappointment (Egede and Egede 1939: 171) and again by a girl who threatens the missionary that she will walk away to become a *qivittoq* if he does not bring her along on his travels to Copenhagen (ibid.: 206).

thereby lose his human personhood and identity. He would now be able to drink and hunt again, and he would be entirely self-reliant and self-condemned to a life in loneliness as a *qivittoq*. The exact meaning of the word *qivittoq* is of some debate, but Petersen (2006) regards it to be the opposite, or inversion of the Greenlandic word *qiviartoq* (to turn one's face towards others). Others (Lynge 1997: 19) prefer a broader translation and thus regard the word "disappointed" to be more fitting. Graburn posits that the similar word "qivituk" in Baffin Island describes the self-detachment of a person who is not powerful enough to face a particular problem, and who in turn would then turn his back on the community, sometimes just for a short while, and other times to live with another group. The same word, Graburn continues, has become synonymous with suicide (Graburn 1969: 48). Nuttall (1992: 114) likens the *qivittoq* to a "stranger" (*takornaartoq*) partly because the *qivittoq*, like a stranger, is someone no one has any living memory of, and because in many Greenlandic villages strangers represent ambiguity, conspicuousness and sometimes, even danger (e.g. Dahl 2000: 8–10). Strangers, however, do not usually remain strangers. Although initially ambiguous, strangers will always possess the potentiality for relatedness, and should they wish, become family. Conversely, the *qivittoq* remains an outsider partly because he has irreversibly refused the human world and is thus incapable of recreating human relatedness, and because he has crossed a threshold and (or to) become a supernatural, un-human being. The fear of the *qivittoq* does thus not begin and end with revenge, his ability to kill, or cause pain and hurt. Nor even with his un-human, super-human abilities, which although at the same time extreme and perverse, essentially can be likened to the skills of a good hunter, only magnified. Rather, I argue, the fear vested in him stems from the *qivittoq*'s loneliness, which causes the *qivittoq* to relate to ordinary humans through anti-human, anti-social feelings and acts, and is a kind of loneliness of which human persons cannot make sense or experience. He has crossed a threshold and become the epitome of loneliness, and denotes the permanent loneliness in a way that human persons could never experience unless they, like him, chose to become a *qivittoq*.

Although extreme and outside, the position and personhood occupied by the *qivittoq* nevertheless has some liminal qualities to it—his movement across boundaries of land and village; having the physical appearance of a human and yet only being able to converse with animals; having turned his back on society, lost his name and thus become "socially" dead; and yet not physically dead to name a few. Ritual liminars (Turner 1974: 231–3) invariably have the promise of resolution and reintegration as initiates into a new state (or form). Their state and placement as liminal characters is thus temporary. Turner falls short of distinguishing how his "marginals" might experience or be allocated to a permanent state of liminal betwixt-and-between, and why his "outsiders" do not, as they reside permanently outside. Agamben's (1998) discussion of "bare life" or life lived in "zones of indistinction," although essentially about liminal subjects (prisoners, exiles, terrorists) that constitute modernity and democratic order, does bear some relevance here. "Homo sacer," sacred, or rather, separate man,

a figure of Roman law, once a citizen, had his basic rights revoked by sovereign decree, and reduced to "bare life." Homo sacer is a threshold figure; an outlaw. He can be killed by anyone, as he has no rights, but not sacrificed, as sacrifice only occurs within the legal context of the city, from which he is banished. In other words, he is set apart from others, citizens, by law, and while he has no rights to representation before the law, he is nevertheless still included in the law by the penalty of death. His exclusion produces a new kind of inclusion; a zone of indistinction, a liminal threshold, upon which life can only be "bare life." What is crucial here is the ban, which Agamben links semantically to words like bandit, banishment, abandonment; and to Romance languages in which "to be banned" apart from meaning "excluded" also means "at the mercy of" and "freely" (1998: 104–5, 110), thus highlighting his point about the ambiguous and simultaneous expulsive and inclusive zone of indistinction.

Thus, the *qivittoq* is not just a figure "outside" of human relatedness. We might say that he lives "bare life" in a zone of indistinction, in which he at one and the same time is excluded from participating in human relatedness, and yet, includes himself, inversely, by being anonymous, unrecognizable, and by stealing instead of sharing, attacking instead of caressing. We might also say that he, at one and the same time has excluded himself from participating in human relatedness, and yet that he is, not included, but *longing* for human relatedness. As much as they are feared for their extreme loneliness and search for vengeance, the *qivittut* are also pitied. They can often be heard crying in longing, but unlike living humans, they have no tears. They have cried so much, some say, during their initial days of banishment that they have run out of tears. They have lost their human language, and can converse now only to humans. They have no names and therefore no human identity. Although human persons know that the *qivittoq* once was a human too, no one has any memory of him as a human person. Although some humans may have remembered him in the past, and perhaps even longed for the *qivittoq* for some time after he had detached, those people have long since died; and returned. Unlike the *qivittoq* who can never return. Not to human society, not to his human form, nor through his name to a newborn. He is forever trapped, living in loneliness somewhere between the past and present; between the living and the dead; between the human, the superhuman, nonhuman and antihuman.

Returning the Dead

One common aspect for suicidal behavior and suicide prevention is that suicide attempts in Euro-America are often perceived to be driven by a "cry for help" and the desire to be found in time to be rescued, rather than by an actual wish to die. This brings to the fore the idea that suicide attempts are acts of despair, and in turn making the completed suicides appear even more tragic and cruel. Completed suicides could in theory be "cries for help" gone wrong. Accidents. Failure to not "cry for help" properly, or in a way which was understood. For Islanders the

intent that makes the distinction between suicide attempts and completed suicides in Euro-America seems much more clear-cut. Here, whether a suicide attempt is completed or not, it tends to be perceived as the expression of the intent to die. Thus, when commenting on recent events where a young man was interrupted in the middle of a suicide attempt one woman said: *"Thankfully, they found him."* She added after a pause: *"although, now that he has tried it once, he might try it again,"* almost as if to suggest that once the thought of suicide had been expressed through the attempt, it would have manifested and refused to leave, as indeed had been the case of another Islander a decade or so prior. During his teens and early twenties, he had made several suicide attempts by hanging himself in the family's storage house. Each time, his father had found and rescued him *"just in time."* Another woman commented on her own interrupted suicide attempt some years after the fact. Displeased with the way suicide was narrated and expressed in the media: *"Until they try suicide themselves ..."* She said, *"... they will not understand what it is like to be so tired*[8] *that all you want to do, is die."* Now, she was pleased and thankful to have survived the attempt, but in that moment, all those years ago, when she was found and saved by a relative who had sensed something was amiss, she was not.

Completed or not, the suicide attempt is thus understood to be an expression of a person's intent and determination to commit suicide. Moreover, it is a kind of determination that does not necessarily disappear once an attempt has been interrupted. This intent, I argue, has to do with personhood, agency, and the power of the mind. There is a sense that once the thought or desire to die has manifested in the mind (*sila*, *isuma*) it can become possessive. When a person is "tired" for example, or when a person "has lost his reason and awareness" (*silaruuppoq*), a person's mind can become rapidly susceptible to spirits or excessive thoughts and longings. Similarly, excessive homesickness, longing or thinking about a particular place, subject or relative, can cause the longing person's spirit (*anersaaq*) to wander to these places, entirely "by its own accord" (*nammineq*) and without the person knowing or willing it. The Greenlandic word *isumaminik*, most commonly used to state "mind your own business" is important here. Its root, *isuma*, means "mind," "opinion," "meaning." Its affix "*–minik*" related to *imminik*, is a word regularly used interchangeably with *nammineq*, "by itself." Directly translated the *isumaminik* means "the mind or opinion is its own." *Isumaminik* denotes an ideology of non-interference in a person's integrity and reason for doing a particular thing in a particular way. The similar Utku Inuit word (*ihumaminik*), Briggs (1998: 242) translates as "I do what I will / think," and proceeds to argue that the question "why?" therefore both is disrespectful, and essentially pointless. Christiansen (1991) argues that this *isumaminik* ideology of non-interference indirectly relates to the high suicide rate in the Ilulissat region of Greenland,

8 *Qasoqqavoq* refers to the soul being tired; perhaps similar to what is considered depression in Euro-American psychiatric discourses. The related word *Qassuvoq* refers to being physically tired and *Uernartoq* is to be sleepy.

to which people appear indifferent. People, friends, relatives, neighbors do not see it as their place to interfere, or demand answers of a person who intends to commit or attempt suicide. However, instead of readily associating *isumaminik* with indifference, I argue instead that *isumaminik* is an ideology about recognizing another person's right to personal entitlement, agency, integrity and autonomy, to act as they themselves see fit, even in cases of suicide.

This sense of being, or entitlement to act autonomously and by one's own accord, is not entirely separable from relatedness. Despite, or rather alongside, the manifestation of Lutheran Christianity in Greenland today, most if not all people are a returned person, a partial reincarnation. They are the namesakes, the *atsiat* (sing: *atsiaq*) of deceased family or community members. Once a person is dead, his or her name(s) (*aqqit*, sing: *ateq*) leave the corpse and journey to the northern lights (aurora borealis) where they play ball with the skulls of walrus, waiting to return (*uterpoq*). The soul (*tarneq*) of the deceased makes the Christian journey to live eternal life in Heaven, while a person's spirit or breath (*anersaaq*) remains on land where it can take the appearance of a ghost on land or in houses. Once a child is born, parents and relatives (even sometimes non-relatives) watch attentively as the infant begins to engage with his or her surroundings. A certain look when a relative or visitor enters the room, an immediately identifiable smile, cry, or noise; a positive or negative reaction to a smell, a sight, a place or sound, all help adults identify who has returned, and thus who the child should be named after. Sometimes, even during pregnancy, the expecting parents or grandparents, or relatives of the deceased may have dreams, in which one or more deceased individuals appear, offering them an object, usually flowers. These dreams are also taken as a sign that the imminent infant should be the deceased's *atsiaq*. People are usually given several names, often from different deceased, and, in Greenland, bestowed onto the child by Christian baptism.

These naming traditions are common among Inuit groups throughout the Arctic and have been discussed both with relevance to relatedness and personhood (Bodenhorn 2000, 2006; Guemple 1965; Nuttall 1994; Søby 1985). It is important to note that among Islanders at least, these different personhoods are not believed to remain separate entities which in theory would allow a child to consciously switch between personhoods or personalities, in order to one moment *become* one person and another person in the next. Such a scenario would imply that names "glue" onto a person's will, agency, personhood, when the case is rather that the names *are* personhood. This creates a flexible or "fluid" (Guemple 1965) system of relatedness, where relations (and relatives) remain permanent insofar as they are continually re-invoked into the present. It is a system of relatedness, which places relatedness not only at the center of sociality, but also in everyday life, in the present. Because each deceased person is continually returned into the present, and continually remembered (and lived) in the present, there is no long descendant line of ancestry, thus making the kinship "structure" relationally intricate, potentially wide, but generationally shallow. A young woman in her early twenties had been named after an uncle (mother's brother) called Hans, who had died by

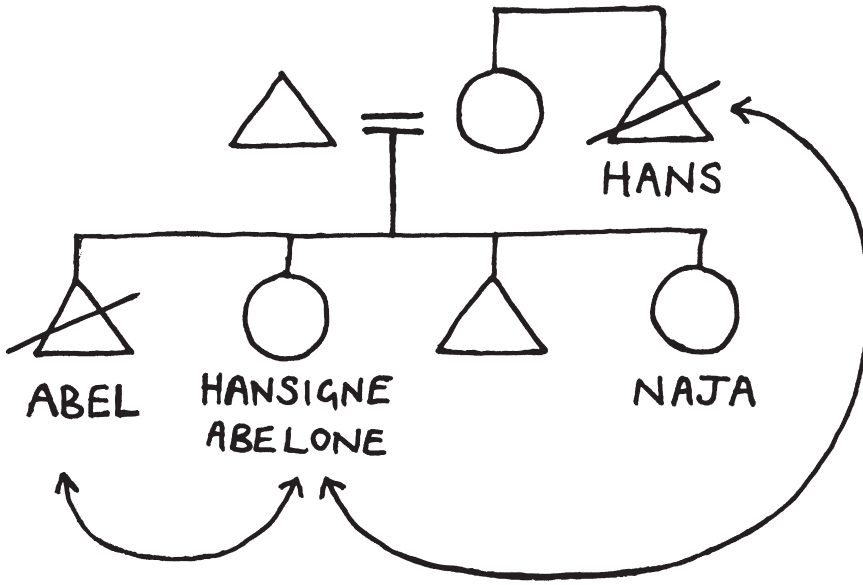

Figure 3.1 Kinship diagram of a family who are related both through biological and naming ties. Illustration by Ruth Horry

suicide (see Figure 3.1). In addition she had also been bestowed the name of her older brother, Abel, who had died, only a few years old. Her names, originally male had been feminized to suit a girl: Hansigne and Abelone. Being both the returned person of her uncle and her older brother, *atsiaq* and *angerlartoqut*,[9] this young woman would navigate a complex network of relations, with her mother, her aunts, grandparents and her siblings.

At one time her mother might address her as *erneeraq* (sweet, little son), other times as *aqqalu* (younger brother), and sometimes as *panik* (daughter). Equally her younger siblings would both address her as older sister (*angaju* or *aleqa*),[10] as well as older brother (*angaju* or *ani*), or indeed *angaa* (mother's brother). With the bestowal of names the child inherits various aspects of personhood, traits, likes, dislikes, sometimes even memories of his namesakes. A young girl from another

9 *Angerlartoqut*, "the dead has come home" is another category of the more usual *atsiaq*, where a child within the same biological family or household is named after a deceased older sibling.

10 Kinship terminology in Greenland is gender and age specific, signifying the relation both in terms of gender and age of the addressee as well as the addresser. *Angaju* means an "older sibling" to a younger same sex sibling (an *angaju* can thus be both female and male). *Aleqa* means "older sister" to a younger brother, while *ani* means "older brother" to a younger sister.

village, one Islander relayed to me, was named after her mother's sister who had taken her own life on a nearby hill-top on the outskirts of the village. One day, while the Islander was visiting, the girl surprised her parents by pointing towards the nearby hill, saying to her mother: "*Look angaju* (older sister), *I died over there.*" Although the names belonged to someone else, and in some sense, still do, they nevertheless have an individuating character in themselves, as much as they are vehicles for an *atsiaq* to achieve personal autonomy. The upbringing for a child is to find his roles, responsibilities but also sense of *nammineq*, ability and confidence to act independently and responsibly, within the various networks of "biological and social" kin of which he now, through his name, is a part. He will be addressed by the kinship terminology which corresponds to the position held by his various deceased namesakes (*aqqat*, sing. *aqqa*), and he will address his namesakes' biological kin accordingly. It is through the expression appropriate of kinship terminology, rather than expression of the name itself, that the different aspects of personhood, personal qualities, and traits are re-invoked, ultimately, in order to nurture kin relations through closeness and intimacy. To one woman, Nivi, for example, the seven-year-old boy who lived next door would, on most days, remain a boy by the name of Jaaku, class mate of Nivi's daughter. She would refer to him as Jaaku, and address him as Jaaku whenever it was necessary for her to do so, or if by chance their paths and chores coincided. On occasion however it was as if she recognized her father in this young boy, because besides having been bestowed the name Jaaku, the young boy had also been bestowed the name Piitaaq after Nivi's dead father. In these isolated moments she would long for her father and call out to Jaaku; not by addressing him as Jaaku as she usually would. Nor would she address him by his middle name, Piitaaq, as indeed, she would have never addressed her own father by his name. Instead she would crouch down to Jaaku's seven-year-old height, open her arms wide preparing herself for an embrace and call out: "dad" (*ataata*). Jaaku would respond by approaching her, sharing her embrace and reciprocate her address by uttering: "my daughter" (*paniga*).

Whereas for 1980s England (Strathern 1992: 18–20), the utterance of names promoted the treatment of children as "individuals" and the address of parents and grandparents by their kinship position; the use of kinship terminology among Islanders, runs both ways. Here, it is the names that provide the individuating character, personhood, but it is uttering the kinship terminology which corresponds to the name, which promotes persons as individuals and relatives at the same time. It is in these re-invoking moments that relations become real and alive, or as Bodenhorn (2006) puts it in her discussion on names and personhood among the Iñupiat, "Called into Being." However, indefinite periods may pass where specific relations (whether based on biology or named) appear latent or even non-existent, due to their lack of re-invocation. However their potential to be re-invoked remains, which becomes apparent when suddenly on an *aqqa*'s birthday, the *atsiaq* becomes the center of attention by his namesake's kin, or even in the everyday when suddenly a bereaved senses a longing for her deceased relative.

Thresholds and Loneliness

Everyday relatedness dramas underscore both how personhood is underpinned by the system of relatedness, as well as the subtle between closeness as well as personal autonomy, which is realized through it. It also brings to the fore something less obvious, which is the precarious role of loneliness and longing in the everyday expression of kinship. A male Islander in his thirties once made this clear by stating that "*you are given your name, so you won't be lonely*." It is easy to perceive how the system of relatedness in northwest Greenland might fulfill the desire for avoiding loneliness. There will, in theory always be relations that can be re-invoked. What may not be so obvious is the implicit, yet structurally central role the concepts of longing and loneliness might play in this. Obeyesekere (2005: 46–50) notes, that particularly in the case of Inuit reincarnation escatology, reincarnation is not solely about maintaining a system itself. It is as much about the desire of the bereaved for the deceased to return. And I would add also, the desire, or rather longing (*kipisaneq*) for the deceased to return. In other words, what facilitates the *return* of ancestors, and what makes children behave according to their names and subsequent kinship positions rests not on the kinship system, or even the name alone, but rather on the bereaved kin's "longing" for the deceased, and they socialize the named child (their returned relative) accordingly. That is to say, the bereaved *will* the return. Likewise, the name of the deceased longs to return, reunite and continue his relation with his kin. In 2004, Hansigne Abelone's sister, Naja, gave birth to a little girl (see Figure 3.2).

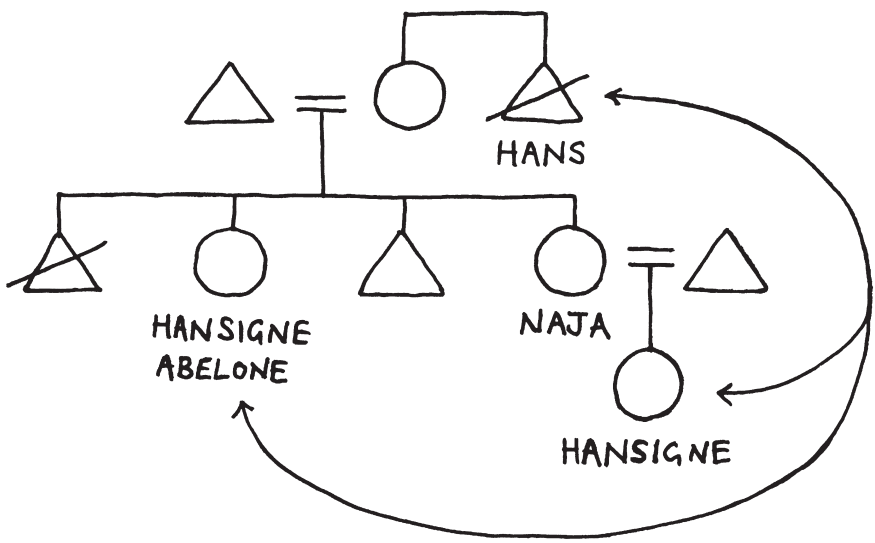

Figure 3.2 Kinship diagram of the same family as in Figure 3.1, but with the willed return of an uncle. Illustration by Ruth Horry

The daughter bore the uncanny resemblance of her deceased uncle, the aforementioned Hans. One afternoon their mother, now a grandmother, was pondering the resemblance between her granddaughter and deceased brother, and the obvious attraction, perhaps even preference, the granddaughter showed towards her. When the infant's parents sometimes struggled to comfort their child's crying, she on the other hand, could quieten the infant instantly, she said, simply by holding her for a short while. And when she refused to sleep, all she had to do was lie on the floor, resting the infant on top of her chest, close to her heart. There was no doubt in her mind that her grandchild indeed was her brother who had returned. Her youngest daughter, she explained, had suffered times of longing and mourning her uncle's suicide, Hans, who had died some years before she herself was born. Despite the fact that her older sister, Hansigne Abelone, was named after him, she had found it difficult to accept, that she had an uncle who she had never met. One evening she had cried uncontrollably, and she kept repeating the same question: "*When will Hans return?*" According to her mother, it was this intense longing, her daughter's grief and potent question all those years ago, which willed her uncle to return in this way.

The longing and loneliness experienced, and utilized, in everyday forms and expressions of relatedness is a temporary and reversible one. This too is the case for death, "ordinary" and "unusual" or "sinister" ones, such as those by suicide. The longing and loneliness denoted and experienced by a *qivittoq* however, is as extreme as it is irreversible, and it is here, in the mirror-side of relatedness, we find the starkest difference between suicide and *qivittoq*. They are entirely different kinds of self-detachment, because their experience of loneliness and longing is different. This may, or may not be the case in terms of their "causality," which has been muted in this chapter. However, their performances are different and so too are the kinds of death and personhood they achieve. Whereas one wanders quietly into the wilderness, and undergoes a psychological and spiritual transformation, quietly, the other dies a physical death, ordinarily, within an area inhabited by other humans. One does not receive a Christian funeral, while the other one does. Equally, the *qivittoq* does not receive any official place of commemoration, whereas the suicide is buried in the cemetery. Finally, the *qivittoq*'s name does not return to newborn infants, whereas the suicide's name is returned. We might then say that the *qivittoq* dies a social, but not physical death, whereas the suicide dies a physical rather than social death. However, this distinction is less straightforward when we consider what they each achieve in their self-detachment. For a person to return through his name there must be an element or a threshold of separation. The person has to be socially acknowledged as dead; his body laid to rest and his soul blessed in peace through a Christian funeral. Equally, where personhood was determined by the name, and the name alone, each person who returned would necessarily also be the same person, giving way for an ancestor centered kinship system, as well as for difficulties explaining differences between individuals who are named after the same person. In other words, the name that returns in one infant, may or may not carry the

same traits, memories, in the next infant who receives the name, because it will not be the same person who is being returned, because it is not the same person who is remembered. Similarly, while the *qivittoq* is not alive as the human person he used to be (because after some time, no one remembers him anymore) he is nevertheless more than merely physically "alive." He possesses memories, feelings of longing, loneliness and of aggression, all of which he is able to act upon and thus become a real threat to living human persons.

The central proposal of this chapter was to question the conventional definition of suicide within a Greenlandic context, and thus question two different characters turn towards as they turn away. The threshold that marks a suicide is not *where* we would expect it to be, because suicide is not *what* we expect it to be. Though there is a threshold of ambiguity between ordinary kinds of death and suicide, this threshold does not serve to mark the separation between good and acceptable from unacceptable and bad forms of death. The real distinction is not between suicide and any other form of death, because as we have seen, suicide, as other kinds of death, is returnable. Suicides are returned. The *qivittoq* is not. The real distinction is rather about the reversibility of loneliness that these characters come to experience. An act of suicide, like other forms of death, makes the bereaved long for, or feel lonely, to the extent that the suicide is brought back, included and nurtured in a broad set of relations that vigorously utilizes longing loneliness in a temporary way. A *qivittoq* on the other hand cannot be returned in this way. The longing and loneliness that might be felt by his flight, is instead transformed into separation, fear and hostility. Moreover, the longing and loneliness that might otherwise have been experienced by the "bereaved" now becomes the *qivittoq*'s in an extreme and irreversible form, which humans could not experience, unless, or lest, they themselves become a *qivittoq*. The *qivittoq* is *kiserliortoq*. He lives in loneliness.

The threshold, which corresponds to what we conventionally understand by suicide, leads us in to the *qivittoq* rather than suicide. The *qivittoq* is a hyper-suicide, much more than a suicide is a suicide, as it is the *qivittoq* who marks the threshold between reversible and irreversible forms of loneliness and absence, and not the suicide. Of the entire repertoire of characters and persons apart among Islanders, the *qivittoq* is the only character who is not longed for. Moreover, possibly due to his long life, no one actually remembers him. It is perhaps for these reasons that he is the one who is feared the most. He has reached an irreversible category of personhood, an irreversible form of separation and death, and does not have a conventional place within the human world as a returned person like everyone else. It is the *qivittoq* who cannot return, and it is *he* who cannot seek redemption and it is *he* who is doomed to an ambiguous existence in the realms between life and death indefinitely. The threshold is further underpinned by loneliness and the fact that the *qivittoq* represents to Islanders something so fundamentally anti-human, namely the full realization of the predicament of being *kiserliortoq*, as something to be feared, not just as an outside force embodied by the *qivittoq*, but also as a potential which can overcome all humans.

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Chapter 4
Between Demons and Disease: Suicide and Agency in Yucatan, Mexico

Beatriz M. Reyes-Foster

The spring of 2008 marked a low point in the history of Xulab, a Yucatec Maya village of just under 400 in the Southeastern Mexican state of Yucatan.[1] On March 6, Ana,[2] a 16-year-old girl from a troubled family, was found hanging by the neck from her family's shower head. Just over a month later, on April 26, the body of Ana's 17-year-old best friend, María, was discovered sitting in a cross-legged position in her bedroom, a hammock tightly wound around her neck. These two deaths shook the small community to its core. Xulab usually saw one or two deaths in a given year. The deaths of Ana and María came as a devastating shock. Lidia, a community health technician, is trained by the state public health administration to administer over-the-counter medication, first aid, and address non-emergency health concerns. When the deaths took place, it was Lidia's responsibility to contact the physician in the nearest health clinic, located in a community a 20-minute car ride down a dirt road.

Soon after Ana's death, Lidia began to experience sudden anxiety. She startled easily, and became very afraid of being home alone or of sleeping in her hammock. She began to think obsessively about suicide. Her symptoms worsened after María's death.

> L: As for me, when it had just happened, I was afraid of laying down in my hammock. God forbid the evil might make me do something like that. I was afraid for myself.
>
> BRF: So, the evil leads you to do it?
>
> L: Yes

1 Parts of this chapter appeared in an earlier article in the *Journal of Religion and Violence* (Reyes-Foster 2013).

2 All names of people, living and dead (with the exception of Dr. Gaspar Baquedano, who is a recognized scholar in the field) have been changed to protect their identities. The name and geographical location of Xulab has been changed. However, it would have been impractical to attempt to change or disguise the name of Merida, the capital of the state of Yucatan, or of the field site, Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatan.

> BRF: How? How does evil lead people to commit suicide?
>
> L: It was like I no longer enjoyed listening to music or hearing people talking. I felt very anxious, like I wanted to get out, to cry, to scream, I don't know. Go. I don't even know where, I just knew I wanted to go somewhere else. I felt like I couldn't go on anymore. I felt like I was going crazy … I wondered, what did they feel? When they hung themselves. I thought about it so much and I got scared of doing the same thing. But with the help of the psychologist and my prayers, thank God, I feel that I am becoming calm again.

One could say that following Ana's and subsequently María's suicides, Lidia began exhibiting textbook symptoms of clinical depression and post-traumatic stress or PTS (American Psychiatric Association 2000). In a classical psychological narrative, Lidia's symptoms, appearing shortly after these traumatic events, would evidence a causal relationship between the suicides (the trauma) and the symptoms (the depression and PTS). In fact, Lidia did seek professional psychological help, she took medication, and, eventually, her symptoms began to improve. On the surface, the globalization of biomedicine and its discourse couldn't be clearer: Lidia, both through her particular symptomatology and by seeking help and complying with treatment despite serious obstacles such as basic transportation between Xulab and the nearest town, is displaying the sensibilities of a modern subject engaging in self-care (Foucault 1978). However, Lidia did not see her symptoms as the result of trauma. She did not consider herself to be suffering from trauma nor from any kind of mental illness. Instead, Lidia identified her symptoms as a demonic strategy to lure her into suicide, though she also recognized that treatment, combined with prayer, were an effective tactic of resistance.

Present-day yucatecan attitudes and beliefs about suicide are ambivalent. Suicide is, on the one hand, completely nonagentive[3]: the *suicida* [person who commits suicide] is a victim of a demonic power over which he or she has no control. On the other hand, Catholicism and newer protestant theologies prohibit suicide. Personal responsibility, here indexing agency, thus is at once attributed to and taken away from the *suicida*. These views inform not only the ways in which people affected by suicide process the suicide of others, but, as extensive work with survivors of highly lethal suicide attempts shows, the motivations of people who attempt suicide as well.

In this chapter, I argue that biomedical discourse shares similar characteristics with local understandings of health, allowing it to become subordinated to local logics of suicide, revealing a nuanced and complex understanding of the agency of suicide that could be understood using Sherry Ortner's (1987) concept of "loosely structured" actors. I will demonstrate 1) how local understandings of

3 In this chapter, I use Laura Ahearn's definition of agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (2001: 112).

suicide reflect and reinforce beliefs about the person, the spiritual realm, and a model of health based on equilibrium in time and space; and 2) how Yucatec Maya users of Mexico's public health system readily adapt the biomedical model to existing paradigms that comingle spiritual, mental, and bodily health due in great part to the inherent contradictions in both systems that simultaneously attribute agency and take it away. In short, discourse about suicide in Yucatan contains an apparent contradiction informed by an unbounded personhood that results in profound social ambivalence regarding agency and the causes, and consequences, of voluntary death. This apparent contradiction is thus a sympathetic template on which biomedical discourse and its imperfect application can map itself.

The research that forms the basis of this study was conducted throughout the year 2008 in the Mexican state of Yucatan. Yucatan is located at the tip of the Yucatan Peninsula in southeast Mexico. It has a population of approximately 1.9 million people, with nearly 1 million concentrated in the capital city of Merida. Research for this study was based on six months of ethnographic and archival research in the area around and within the city of Valladolid (pop. 70,000) as well as six months of institutional ethnography and in-depth interviews in Merida (pop. 1,000,000). Because my research was focused on users of Mexico's government-run public health system, my research subjects were primarily poor and of Yucatec Maya descent. Research methods included participant observation within and outside clinical settings, structured and unstructured interviews with users of mental health services provided by the Mexican government, and archival research.

Background: Suicide in Yucatan

Yucatan's suicide rate is more than twice that of the Mexican national average. Newspapers with graphic photographs of suicides were accompanied by headlines such as "He followed the funereal steps of Ixtab" (González 2008) or "He worshipped Ixtab" (2008), indexing suicide as a Maya problem by invoking the name of the ancient Maya suicide deity, Ix Tab. As I discuss elsewhere (Reyes-Foster 2013b), these depictions were highly problematic, erroneously portraying suicide as a Maya phenomenon. However, preliminary research showed some compelling evidence of high suicide rates and quite a bit of public interest in the topic. Suicide attempts seemed common throughout the peninsula. Regardless of who I spoke to or where I traveled, in every village, town, and city I encountered people whose lives had been affected by suicide and suicide attempts. These early experiential encounters encouraged me to address the topic in a systematic manner. In 2008, I went to Yucatan to conduct field research on suicide, hoping to figure out whether there was, in fact, a connection between Yucatan's elevated suicide rate and Maya culture.

It is important to note that the suicide rate in Yucatan in 2008 was 9.2 per 100,000 people (INEGI 2008). That same year, the suicide rate in Mexico was of 4.6 per 100,000 people. When compared to the rest of Mexico, this rate may

Lunes 21 de Enero de 2008

De Peso

ALERTA TIZIMIN

▶ Cuando una persona se dedica mucho a la bebida no se sabe en qué momento tomará la fatal determinación de salir por la puerta falsa, como sucedió con Ilman Enrique.

Ilman rindió culto a Ixtab

Figure 4.1 **"Ilman worshipped Ixtab"** ***De Peso*****, January 21, 2008**

appear high. But when we compare it to suicide rates around the world, the picture changes somewhat: the suicide rates of Japan (24 per 100,000 people), Lithuania (30 per 100,000 people) and Sweden (28 per 100,000) dwarf the "suicide problem" of Yucatan (WHO 2011). The idea that Yucatan has a crisis in public health because of its elevated suicide rates is thus a matter of perception. Nonetheless, the marked difference in rates of suicide between Mexico and Yucatan is remarkable, and my research question focused on whether in Yucatan we could speak of a cultural predisposition to suicide. My original research question focused on the possibilities of a social construction of suicide. As my research progressed, I began to wonder, what were the dispositions (Bourdieu 1972; 1984; 2004) brought into the exchange of mental health provider and receivers? I soon noticed that the discourse people used to talk about suicide was heavily laden with religious and spiritual references, and that these references were embedded within their discourses about body and mind.

Many of these spiritual references and the discourses they index can be traced back to the Spanish Colonial Period. The shadow of Ix Tab, the Ancient Maya "suicide goddess," looms large over any study of suicide in Yucatan. According to Diego de Landa (de Landa 1978), the people inhabiting the Yucatan Peninsula at the time of the conquest

> said and held it as absolutely certain that those who hanged themselves went to this heaven of theirs; and on this account, there were many persons who on slight occasions of sorrows, troubles, or sicknesses, hanged themselves in order to escape these things and to go and rest in their heaven, where they said that the goddess of the gallows, whom they called Ix Tab, came to fetch them (Tozzer 1941: 132).

Landa probably wrote his *Relación* in Spain around 1566 (Tozzer 1941). Nearly 50 years later, in 1613, Pedro Sánchez de Aguilar would bemoan the Indian propensity for suicide. In his *Informe Contra Idolores Cultores* (Sánchez de Aguilar 1996), written to demonstrate the failures of the "spiritual conquest" of Yucatan, Sánchez de Aguilar recommends the creation of a new position, a *fiscal,* within individual Yucatecan churches. Among the fiscal's duties would be the administration of *bien morir*, the good death:

> This fiscal, knowing how to read, and write, should help the ill to die well [bien morir], giving form to the ritual … and talking to him to encourage him and revive his faith and hope. Because, without this consolation and comfort, [the dying] despair, and are strongly tempted by the Devil to hang themselves [my emphasis].

This colonial text is strong evidence of a prevalence of suicide in the colonial period. It also first introduces the idea of demonic intervention in suicide. Although Ix Tab has, to the best of our knowledge, been forgotten in the vast majority of towns and villages around Yucatan, and the power of the demonic in suicide has

come to dominate discourse about suicide, Baquedano presents a compelling argument whereby a pre-existing ethos accepting of suicide was transformed but not eradicated through the colonial process. This transformation is explored in the following pages through an examination of local understandings of health.

Personal and Social Equilibrium

In Xulab, Judeo-Christian notions of the Devil comingle with Maya constructions of evil winds and forest spirits. Xulab is a village in the clearing of a forest. Members of the routinely read signals from nature as evil omens, and demonic attacks are commonplace. It is hardly surprising that Lidia, the community health technician, framed her experiences following the suicides of Ana and María as demonic attacks. The role of the demonic in suicides in Yucatan repeatedly appeared in my work and has also been documented by others (Baquedano 2009; Hernández Ruiz 2010). Gracia Imberton's (2012) work among the Chol Maya of Chiapas also uncovered demonic intervention as an important factor in the etiology of suicide. While many anthropological studies of the demonic treat the Devil as a character of folk narrative or as a metaphor for class and gender oppression (Edelman 1994; Nash 1997; Sanabria 2007; Taussig 1980), the demonic in suicide discourse in Yucatan is not metaphorical, allegorical, or figurative to subjects on the ground.

As I have described above, suicide is often talked about as though it were a nonagentive act: the person who commits suicide, the *suicida*, becomes a victim of demonic intervention. Interlocutors will often go so far as to state that the Devil physically places the rope around the *suicida*'s neck. However, these same interlocutors will also say that suicide is in fact an agentive act and the *suicida* does have to face the consequences of the sin of suicide. These consequences include specific differences in mortuary ritual. In the same conversation I had with Lidia about suicide as a demonic attack on an innocent, Lidia's discourse reflected a view of suicide that was simultaneously agentive and non-agentive:

> My father was very upset that they buried [Ana] with a normal Catholic ceremony. He said her family should have stuck wooden horns in her ears to drive out the evil, and verbally harassed the corpse, telling her what she did was a bad thing, telling her to leave, to get out of here … then when [María] died, some elders said the same thing, that they needed hammer wooden horns in her head, and circle her head with 12 needles to keep her from taking another … When Ana died, I told my sister, you know, this girl, her family didn't go to church, she didn't have a religion, maybe, to save her own soul, she'll take someone who is close to God. When my sister came by to visit the other day I reminded her. I told her, "see? Remember I told you she might take someone close to God?"

In this excerpt, Lidia describes the ideal mortuary treatment for a suicide that is quite different from Catholic burial rituals, which do not differentiate between suicidal

vs. non-suicidal deaths. The corpse is disfigured and verbally abused as it is taken for burial. The corpse, the material remains of the person, is punished. Furthermore, Lidia notes that she believed, even before María's death, that Ana would "take one close to God to save her own soul." This in and of itself is a fascinating statement: if Ana had no agency when she was taken, why would she have agency to "save her soul" after death? If Ana had no agency in her own suicide, how could she commit a sin? But, if María was "close to God," and was in fact Ana's victim, why would she need special mortuary treatment? Did Ana and María have any choice in their own deaths? If agency is, as I discuss below, "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001: 112), the mediation of action extends beyond death in all its contradictory complexity as Ana, having no ability to act as she is victimized, regains her capacity of action—but only to inflict harm on someone else.

Lidia also spoke about the consequences of suicide for the deceased, stating that "[the soul of a suicide] does not enjoy the gates of Heaven, they go to Hell, because they belong to the Devil." However, when I asked her whether those who commit suicide are called back during Hanal Pixan, the annual return of the dead to the world of the living that coincides with the Mexican Day of the Dead, she responded in the affirmative. "We hold Mass and rosary prayers for them, and welcome them back for the feast of the dead, but, as they say, doing these things just lowers down the flames of Hell for a little while. When the prayers are over the heat turns back on." During our conversation, Lidia repeatedly stated that "what they [Ana and María] did was bad," while at the same time emphasizing that each was a victim of demonic intervention. This anecdote illustrates the contradiction and ambivalence in discourse about suicide in Yucatan regarding the causes and consequences of voluntary death.

In addition to traditionally Catholic discourse about suicide, the powerful role of nature and space also figured in the villagers' reaction to the suicides. Some members of the community attempted to seek answers from local ritual specialists. After María died, community members consulted with a traditional healer (*hméen*), who advised them that the suicides had happened because the village was "open" to evil winds and forces of the forest that surrounds the village. As long as the village remained open, evil winds could continue to enter it and afflict its inhabitants with fevers, headaches, and *nervios*.[4] The village needed to be ritually bound, an expensive undertaking that would necessitate the cooperation of the entire town. Without the ritual, the *hméen* warned, the suicides would continue to happen. This pronouncement created a state of panic, as mothers began to keep their children indoors. About half of Xulab is Protestant; getting the entire community on board with a ritual binding—an unabashedly preChristian ritual—was simply impossible.

The Catholics in Xulab believed that intra-community conflict had opened the community on a spiritual level, making it vulnerable to attack from demonic forest-dwelling sources. However, the forest is not only the haven of evil winds:

4 An anxiety disorder that includes emotional volatility, elevated anxiety, and obsessive thoughts.

it is also the location of the *kool,* the corn field, and of hunting game. It is the place where the *ch'aachak* rain ritual is held. It is a zone of great danger, but also a source of nourishment and life. In the Maya worldview, a delicate balance between village and nature must be maintained through ritual offerings to ensure successful crops, frequent rainfall, and plentiful game. Balance must be maintained between the village and the natural world, but also within the village itself between members of the community. The concept of balance is closely related to the idea of *tranquilidad*, tranquility. Kray (2005: 340) notes that in Dzitnup, a town in the same region as Xulab "tranquility indicates the ideal state of affairs, one in which everyone is in agreement, everything of value is evenly distributed, and respect and respectability characterize human relationships." Kray alludes to the kind of disagreements created by religious and political differences, When the balance is broken, the community becomes vulnerable to illness, broadly defined as both spiritual and physical. People in Dzitnup take pride in the tranquility of their town. In Xulab, people despaired from the lack of it. The responsibility of Ana and María's suicide was carried by everyone in the community: the Devil may have been the proximal culprit in the girls' deaths, but the community was to a great extent responsible for allowing the Devil in when the social equilibrium was lost.

Lack of consensus and balance in community life is locally understood as a source of illness. People in Xulab interpreted Ana and María's suicides as physical manifestations of a disease afflicting the entire town. Figuratively speaking, a deep social illness—rooted in ongoing conflicts between various factions inside the community—was the reason for the unwelcome demonic entrance. "There was a time," Lidia explains, "when we had a fight at every community meeting. The women couldn't even set eyes on one another … sometimes, the meeting would have to get broken up because of the fighting … our village didn't use to be like this. People still aren't speaking to one another."

The descriptions of individual and community-level reactions to Ana and María's deaths reflect the fluidity of boundaries between the Yucatecan person and the space he or she occupies. This fluidity has profound historical roots, not only in pre-Colombian Maya culture (Gillespie 2001; McAnany 1995) but in the mystical Catholicism practiced by those in charge of Yucatan's so-called "Spiritual Conquest" (Lizana 1995). Javier Hirose's (2008) work in the Chenes region of Campeche, another state in the Yucatan Penninsula, focuses on the relationship between body and space. Hirose emphasizes the possibility of occupying several physical spaces at once, and linking a necessary equilibrium in the relationship between person and space to health:

> According to the ideas of a traditional doctor from the state of Campeche regarding the body and its relationship with the universe, the spaces occupied by the human being in the cosmos—the home, the solar, the milpa, the town, and the world—constitute extensions of the body, while the spatial-temporal location of the human being in relationship with these spaces determines the condition of illness or health (1).

The idea that space is an extension of the body is echoed in the work of Timoteo Rodríguez and Juan Castillo Cocom (2010), who document a similar concept of person and space which they term *iknal*. Echoing Hirose's discussion of space and time, Rodríguez and Castillo Cocom state, "Our presence is forged within a proximity to our memories. The bond of one's sensibility to selfhood and to those memories gauges a ratio of presence—a moving ratio of presence coalescing through the recent past and near future. This bond is a spatial presence understood as one's *iknal*" (9). This bond gives meaning to place, and turns physical space into extensions of the self.

Hirose's work carefully and exhaustively catalogues the myriad of Yucatec names and terms for various body parts including internal organs, bones, and external characteristics as well as biological states such as pregnancy. Hirose notes that the Maya person is a single entity that expresses five elements (earth, water, fire, wind, and light) that are projected in a sort of corporeal aura. The actual body is but a "wrapping" (*kukut*) for the spirit, made up of the pixan (*soul*) and the ool (*breath of life*). The pixan inhabits the entire body, the ool is primarily located in the blood (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1933). Subsequently, he explains the ontological understanding of the body as *yaan* (right side, male, translates to "there is") and *yuum* (left side, female, translates to "lord") together forming a single concept: *yaan yuum*, "there is the Lord."

Hirose argues that the natural equilibrium forming the concept *yaan yuum* is in fact a state of health, in other words, that not only can the cure of illness be found in a Creator, but that the Creator itself can be found within the human body in proper equilibrium. This sense of equilibrium extends beyond the individual body to the body social because the self itself extends into physical space. If the key to bodily and spiritual health lies in a harmonic relationship between these physical extensions of the self and the individual "wrapping" represented by the human body, as described by Hirose, it follows, then, and every person can extend into every other person that occupies the same place.

Thus, the self is not merely one part of the community; rather, the entire community is a system of selves connected in space and time. A lack of consensus, or "tranquility," to borrow Kray's term, is dangerous to the physical and spiritual health of everyone in the village. Clearly, this is not to say that in every village and town there are no breaks in tranquility, consensus, or harmony. In fact, squabbles over political party, religion, and other scandals are commonplace everywhere in the Yucatan. These, however, are seen as extremely negative events. Community harmony is thus paramount: the health of an entire community depends on this equilibrium because everyone is linked in a metaphorical and physical way. More importantly, the presence of this equilibrium implies the presence of the divine, the antithesis of evil. This construction of self and community as irreversibly intertwined with one another carries an important implication for the concept of agency: if personhood extends into space and rests in physical objects, so, too, does agency. This presents an interesting opportunity for thinking about agency: from an ontological perspective, if selves extend into space, and physical objects

can have agency, so, too, can the natural world with its evil winds and demonic forces (Latour 2005).

Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatan

My research in the city of Merida uncovered what at first appeared to be an odd contradiction: Maya people, despite holding deeply held beliefs about the nature of the self and its connection to nature and space, seemed to readily embrace the biomedical model of psychiatry to explain suicide. Like Lidia, many Maya people readily made use of the state medical system to seek mental health treatment despite the fact that the biomedical explanation for mental illness—which reduces mental affliction to mishaps in brain chemistry—couldn't be more different from local constructions of person and health. I soon realized that pre-existing ideas about suicide, its etiology and its prevention continued to thrive—including the ever-central role of the demonic—and biomedicine was simply adopted into an existing, locally generated discourse of health. This conclusion begged the question: how did two seemingly conflicting and irreconcilable worldviews coexist in such a harmonious way?

Although Mexican psychology has early roots in European psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis, as of the mid-twentieth century American psychiatric and psychological models have dominated Mexican psychological and psychiatric practice (Galindo 2004). The preferred tool for diagnosis by most practitioners in the hospital is the *Diagnostics and Statistics Manual IV* (*DSM-IV*) of the American Psychiatric Association, even though the official diagnostic manual per Mexico's Secretariat of Health is the World Health Organizations ICD-10. The Secretariat of Public Health (*Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia*), a sub-agency of the Secretariat of Health (*Secretaría de Salud*) is charged with operating the only psychiatric facility in the peninsula, Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatan (HPY). Patients who enter the hospital are funneled to it from every other health care system in Yucatan and other nearby states such as Campeche, Quintana Roo, Chiapas, and Tabasco. Usually, patients are only referred to HPY if they are showing symptoms so severe that 1) they are posing a danger to themselves or others, 2) their families are unable to care for them and they are unable to care for themselves, 3) they have received outpatient psychiatric treatment and have not responded, or 4) they have had repeated and increasingly lethal suicide attempts. Patients who arrive at HPY have usually been undergoing some sort of psychological or psychiatric treatment for some time.

Located in the city of Merida, HPY is almost 100 miles away from Xulab. It is a psychiatric facility offering inpatient and outpatient services that accommodates 160 beds and treats approximately 64,000 people a year. Its operation follows a biomedical approach: patients are treated with a combination of psychiatric drugs and individual and group counseling. The hospital's suicide prevention program, Programa Integral de Atención al Suicidio (PIAS), however, takes an explicitly

holistic approach. Informed by its founder's anthropological background, the program's mission statement includes the use of "interdisciplinary approaches" to achieve medical, psychological, and social recovery. In contrast to other treatment offered at HPY, which tends to focus only on the individual and his or her family, PIAS advocates for a holistic prevention strategy that focusing on improving patients' quality of life and involving family, friends, and neighbors in the effort.

A patient's journey into PIAS usually follows in-patient admission to HPY. Typically, a patient is admitted due to a suicide attempt at the psychiatric hospital when the attempt is particularly lethal or is the latest in a series of multiple attempts. Patients are referred from public hospitals in the region once their injuries have been stabilized and remain at HPY on average about three weeks, although in my time there I saw several patients stay for longer than a month. During their stay, patients are introduced to the PIAS program, where they attend small, in-patient group therapy sessions twice a week and a weekly group meeting. Once the patients are released, they are invited to continue attending the weekly meeting with their families. In six months of ethnographic research, most of the patients I worked with who entered the hospital for in-patient treatment returned to at least a few sessions while others became regular attendees.

Patients also continue using the psychiatric hospital's other services, usually seeing a non-PIAS affiliated psychiatrist as well as attending weekly PIAS meetings. Because the hospital is the only psychiatric hospital in the region, it serves people of all walks of life, though PIAS patients are predominantly indigenous, poor, and female. Ironically, although a majority of PIAS participants are women, the group is dominated by the male members, who tend to speak and direct meetings more than the female members. This ease of leadership on the part of men can be related to expectations of male dominance of public space as well as male group members' familiarity and participation in 12-step recovery groups, which function in Mexico as spaces for the creation and reiteration of masculinity (Brandes 2002).

Every Thursday morning at HPY, a group of people gathers at the Sigmund Freud room for a group therapy session that resembles a 12-step meeting more than any other Western psychotherapeutic model. Anywhere between 30 to 60 men and women fill the room and for the next hour and half the patients, who are called "usuarios" or "users" in hospital lingo, share their experiences with pain, despair and hopelessness. Usually one will stand and show the rest of the group the scars on her wrists or the deep, red indentation created by a rope during a hanging attempt and relate her story. These sessions offered tremendous insight into the ways in which survivors of suicide attempts make sense of their lives, and also about how the relationships between users and hospital staff and volunteers is manifested in the group. Six months of ethnographic research at HPY with the PIAS suicide prevention group revealed much about the ways in which this program functions to both transform and reiterate patients' relationships with the medical establishment, each other, and their own bodies.

The notion of agency as a self-reflexive, deliberate capacity for action is important if not explicit to Yucatecan clinical psychology. Every day, clinical

psychologists at HPY introduce the discourse of agency into their interactions with patients. By using phrases such as "change your story," "accept responsibility for yourself," "take charge of your life," staff at HPY continually engage in a process of encouraging agency in their patients. Implicit in this encouragement is an assumption that patients entering HPY have no agency. The agency that clinical psychological discourse seeks to instill in its new subjects becomes evident in this exchange between Diana and Luisa, a middle-aged woman who had 14 suicide attempts: During group therapy, Luisa shared that her psychiatrist had told her that suicide was "*parte de mi genética*," or part of her genes. At the end of the session, Diana forcefully told Luisa, "your suicidal ideas are not part of your genetic makeup. You can change your story, you can change your destiny." Diana emphasized Luisa's agency in her own life and challenged her acceptance of a diagnosis that took away any agency at all. Regardless, the trope of suicide as a symptom of disease effectively *making* the user attempt suicide commonly recurred in the small and large group therapy sessions.

The transformation of the demonic into a disease demonstrates how biomedical discourse is subsumed into local etiology. Instead of it being the devil that ties the knot around a *suicida*'s neck, the *enfermedad* takes on this role. However, the association of the demonic to suicide is by no means replaced by a physiological understanding of mental illness rooted in brain chemistry. To quote Gaspar Baquedano, "Mental illness and suicide are considered as having an evil origin. It is a manifestation of the devil under the disguise of a medical disorder, even if it is treated with medicine, in the end it is connected to the supernatural world" (2009: 79). The Devil remains the underlying cause of the suicide, while the mental illness becomes the means by which the Devil achieves his objective.

This viewpoint was discernible at every PIAS meeting I attended, where phrases such as *no le demos derecho al Diablo*, "let us not give the Devil the right," *que no nos gane la mente*, "let us not let our mind 'win'," *con la ayuda de Dios*, "with the help of God" were frequently used. Patients who had survived suicide attempts never explained their experiences as rationally made decisions. Moreover, the vast majority of cases described the events leading up to their suicide attempts as otherworldly experiences. Patients described visions, dreams, and demonic presences and voices in experiences immediately preceding their attempt. In patient discourse at HPY, the idea of "fighting the devil" frequently recurred.

Biomedicine was often considered an effective tool in battling the demonic entities that cause suicide. Although PIAS does not actively engage with the demonic narratives shared by the vast majority of its members, the discourse of agency is absorbed into the demonic narratives. While patients still attribute their suicidal ideation to demonic intervention, they articulate a newfound ability to resist these attacks on their spiritual health. Like Lidia, the community health technician from Xulab, PIAS patients at HPY can fight the Devil with medicine and psychotherapy as well as by relying on belonging to a strong, healthy community and renewed spirituality.

Agency, Structure, Personhood

This chapter has so far argued that clinical models of mental health based on American psychoanalysis and the *DSM-V* are incorporated into patients' understandings of health because Western discourses about mental health are compatible with local understandings of person, which contain an etiology that allows for the inclusion of the demonic as a source of illness. Local understandings of health based on a belief in equilibrium both at level of the person as well as that of the community, makes the PIAS program—with its aim of including family, friends, and neighbors into the individual patient's recovery—particularly compatible with Yucatecan dispositions and understandings of agency and health. Another way of thinking through this compatibility is by taking a closer look at the concept of agency. In some ways, stating that these two apparently competing etiologies of health are in fact compatible with one emphasizes continuity over change. A good way of adding nuance to this analysis is by re-examining agency in this context.

The idea of agency often presupposes a concept of person that is always juxtaposed to structure. This is particularly true in the work of Anthony Giddens but also relevant for more recent analyses of agency. This juxtaposition is understandable, particularly when we try to think about suicide using social theory: Durkheim demonstrates that suicide is a socially mediated act. What role, then, does social structure play in what appears to be an individual act? Some answers can be found in the work of linguistic anthropologist Laura Ahearn. Building on the work of Marshall Sahlins (1981), Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1972; Bourdieu 1991), and particularly Sherry Ortner (1989), Ahearn (2001) uses the theoretical lens of practice theory to propose a definition of agency which is purposefully open to interpretation: "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act." Citing Ortner's concept of "loosely structured" actors (1989: 198), Ahearn states, "the central question … is determining how such loosely structured actors manage at times to transform the systems that produce them" (120). For Ahearn (and Ortner), societal transformations arise out of the inherent structural contradictions present in all societies. Understood this way, the possibility of action—and the possibility of enacting change through action- is inherently present in all societies because all societies contain inherent contradictions that create the space for its existence.

While Ahearn's definition of agency runs the danger of being interpreted through a dichotomy that opposes individuals to social structure, it can be particularly useful when considered alongside the work on personhood of Csordas (1994) and Staples (2003; this volume) which suggest that Western persons are not as bounded as they are often portrayed to be. The binary opposition of individual and social structure presupposes a particular "type" of individual. This individual is traditionally associated with the bounded "Western"[5] person

5 Moreover, "Western" as an ontological category bears further scrutiny: the term is laden with a multiplicity of meanings. Due to constraints of space, an in-depth discussion of

(Geertz 1983), however the term "Western" indexes a group of highly diffuse and diverse populations. The label becomes particularly problematic when applied to long-term postcolonial societies like Mexico, and even more so when working in Yucatan with people of Yucatec Maya descent.[6] If we accept that even the most "bounded" individual is "loosely structured" (Ortner 1989), we can understand that persons, like societies, are also subject to inherent contradictions. When the local construction of the person is one which is defined by her linkages to others—as in the equilibrium of body, spirit, and space that is dependent on a state of harmony with others—a successful suicide, explained as the successful entrance of the demonic into the protected space of the village, is not only a failure of the person who commits the act, but a failure of the entire village.

Agency, then, is not merely limited to the individual that commits suicide, but is diffused throughout the entire community and even within the natural world: this is implicit in the notion that if the community had managed to maintain the right equilibrium, the evil that caused the suicide would not have had entry into the village. If the state of equilibrium is *yaan yuum*, the presence of the lord, a lack of equilibrium necessitates *mina'an yuum*, the lack of the lord. Without protection from the lord, the village becomes vulnerable to the demonic interventions of Evil. It follows, then, that agency is also possessed by the very demonic entities that threaten the well being of the community itself.

Conclusion: The Ambivalence of the Sacred, the Ambivalence of the Medical

In his chapter of the *Oxford Textbook of Suicidology and Suicide Prevention* (2009), Gaspar Baquedano frequently uses two words in his analysis of suicide in Yucatan: religion and ambivalence. In my own research, these two words became a frequent presence in my field notes and interview analyses. For a Yucatecan to attribute suicide to the devil and condemn the *suicida* in a single utterance was as common as it was for a psychiatric patient to discuss the efficacy of psychotherapy and medication in staving off the devil's advances. Nearly every person I spoke to who had attempted suicide expressed a desire for life. Every person I spoke to used a similar narrative of spiritual struggle in describing their suicide attempt. Individual agency was not as important as finding the right equilibrium within a self conceived of as body, spirit, and space. Biomedicine, with a language that emphasizes finding equilibrium in brain chemistry, was one way of achieving it that can be combined with others.

Within classic psychiatric biomedical discourse, this point would be irrelevant. In the words of Baquedano, who has been pioneering efforts to incorporate

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the problems of "Western" and its application to long-term postcolonial societies like those in Latin America is not possible here.

6 The complexity of identity in Yucatan has been addressed elsewhere by Castañeda (2004), Castillo Cocom (2000, 2005), and myself (2012), among others.

anthropological and social scientific perspectives to the treatment of psychiatric patients in Yucatan, to most psychiatrists and psychologists, the culturally specific discourses of patients ultimately boil down to *puras pendejadas*, utter nonsense. Charlotte Blease has argued in her analysis against the Culturally Bound Syndromes (CBS) category in the DSM-IV, "folk theories" are simply nonscientific explanations for existing, scientifically proven illness categories (Blease 2010). The assumption of the DSM-IV is that all human beings essentially think the same way and experience the same mental illnesses regardless of where they are. Through biomedical discourse, mental illness—and suicide as a result of mental illness—is reduced to a series of organic occurrences in the brain. How these organic occurrences may manifest differently cross-culturally has had the attention of anthropologists as well as psychologists engaged in the well-established field of cross-cultural psychology, but as of 2008 had not translated into organized local applications of "culturally competent" psychology in Yucatecan clinical practice. That said, biomedicine's success in Yucatan is perhaps not indicative of a transformation in the subject population, but rather indexes the ways in which this worldview has been subsumed into local etiologies of health.

What are the implications for agency? To begin with, one could accept that alongside elemental compatibility between biomedical discourses of mental health and locally produced etiologies of health are internal contradictions characteristic of each system. Following Ortner's (1989) observation that all societies contain inherent structural contradictions, I would argue that that the same can be said for the construction of the person, particularly when such a sense of personhood extends into space and contains the ever-present possibility of demonic attack. These structural contradictions at once constrain and give rise to human action, allowing for the both the maintenance of the status quo in any given society or worldview as well as the possibilities of change (Ahearn 2003). In many ways, this leads to what an early reviewer of this piece called a "deeper level of cosmological coherency" that was visible in the in the words, actions, and interactions of the research subjects profiled in this chapter, a coherency that can be found by looking beyond the internal contradictions visible at first glance. As I stated in the beginning of this chapter, the contradictory nature of the Yucatecan attitude toward suicide is a sympathetic template upon which biomedical discourse can map itself. But, like a transparent film placed over a map, the elaborate geography beneath it remains.

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Chapter 5
Four Funerals and a Wedding: Suicide, Sacrifice, and (Non-)Human Agency in a Siberian Village

Ludek Broz[1]

The topic of suicide chose me rather than me choosing it. My doctoral fieldwork in the Altai Republic (South West Siberia) coincided with a chain of deaths in Kara village, of which two were, from my point of view, suicides.[2] A 20-year-old girl shot herself; she left a note requesting that she be nicely made up in the coffin. Her death followed that of a young man with whom she had allegedly been in love. A year after being released from jail, he shot himself following a drunken fight with his friends. This incident came shortly after the death of a half-paralyzed old lady. The interval between each consecutive death varied from ten days to a month and a half, all in a village with a population of no more than a few hundred.[3]

What followed this ill-fated chain of events was rather surprising to me. A young couple who had been planning to get married was encouraged to wed as soon as possible with the support of the local community. For me, this seemed rather strange as I had been under the impression that weddings were conducted at a considerable temporal distance from funerals in rural Altaian contexts. The issue attracted my attention only superficially. Only by the end of my fieldwork

1 I am grateful to Janne Flora, Katrina Jaworski, Daniel Münster, Beatriz Reyes-Foster, and other authors represented in this volume for their insightful comments and helpful suggestions regarding earlier drafts of this chapter. Work on this chapter was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (grant no. 13-06860P).

2 Names of people and villages, apart from the regional center Ulagan, are anonymized. I conducted my doctoral and post-doctoral research between 2004 and 2013 in the Ulagan region of the Altai Republic. This Russian part of the Altai Mountains, which lies close to the Mongolian, Chinese and Kazakh borders, is inhabited by both Russians and indigenous Altaians. Generally speaking, the category "Altaian" refers to a "complex national/ethnic label, given to diverse groups of Turkic-speaking inhabitants of Altai, excluding the Kazakhs" (Halemba 2008). Altaians currently comprise some 30 percent of the Altai Republic's population (altogether about 60 thousand people), but in remote mountain areas like Ulagan region they form the vast majority (more than 95 percent).

3 It is hard to provide a precise estimate of the village's population, as statistical records do not recognize Kara as an independent administrative unit. Kara's population is counted into the population of much larger Kyzyl, which is about 15 kilometers away from Kara.

I realized that during several years of fieldwork in Ulagan region of the Altai Republic I came across more suicide cases than I had in my whole life up until then, and it was this fact that led me to focus on the phenomenon in data analysis. Unlike the rest of the contributors to this volume, I never focused on the topic of suicide during the course of my field research. Rather, in studying local explanatory practices, I kept uncovering suicide among the alleged consequences of various events that I would never directly link to suicidal behavior. The specific path that led me to the topic of suicide means that the picture I am going to paint in this chapter is concerned only with one set of meanings and explanations locally associated with suicidal behavior.

According to Durkheim, "[the term] *suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result.* An attempt is an act thus defined but falling short of actual death" (Durkheim 1952: xii; original emphasis). More recent definitions of suicide have invoked the following three characteristics: intention (or comprehension); an act of self-destruction (whether active or passive); an end result (e.g. death, injury) (see Andriessen 2006; Marušič 2004). In this sense, suicide in contemporary suicidology comes into being at the interface of intention/comprehension and action. In order to distinguish between accidental and suicidal behavior, no definition can omit some concept of intent (or its equivalent), even though scholars are well aware that this is always the most problematic part of a suicide definition (e.g. Andriessen 2006: 534).

The problem of intention or comprehension in suicide is intertwined with the taken-for-granted Western concept of a person as a subject-agent whose intentions are only indirectly accessible to others. This is apparent in the issue of the "fake suicide attempt" that has long occupied suicidologists. As Stengel puts it, "attempted suicides are usually regarded either as bungled suicides or as fakes. But are not some, or many, so-called successful suicides bungled attempted suicides?" (1952: 618). In such cases, there is an absence not only of intent but also, if the suicidal person was "sure" that the means used to attempt suicide would not lead to death, of the comprehension ("knowing") of the fatal consequence. In this sense, Durkheim's definition does not lead to the recognition of suicide beyond doubt. In fact, it directs our attention towards the very act of recognition. If suicide comes into being by coupling of intention and action, such a combination is always situated in the past in relation to its recognition thereof (i.e. classification of the act/death as suicide). With the intentional suicidal subject missing (i.e. dead), it is always the classification by others that supposes the pairing. I therefore suggest that, empirically speaking, recognition is the third condition of suicide's becoming. Such recognition always has an aspect of interpretation and explanation.

Here, however, resides an interesting tension described in the introduction to this volume. The mentioned above act of recognition, without which suicide is not possible, seems to erode the intention of the suicidal subject through the principle inherent to the logic and mechanism of explanation. Specifically, any given definition of suicide is characterized by this tension between ascribing agency/authorship to

the suicidal subject and shifting it away to the motive, cause, explanation. In such an explanatory framework, any explanation of the material act of suicide externalizes the creative momentum therein, thus possibly diminishing or erasing authorship from the suicidal subject. This testifies to a well-known tension between structure and agency in the social sciences (see Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

In response to this problem of agency, this chapter will examine the degree to which such tension is present in the Altaian context. Following Jaworski, I will focus on "examining the constitution of intent and agency in the act of suicide" (2010: 675). I will pay attention to the ascription of suicidal agency in a place where suicide is often linked to soul loss or stealing. Furthermore, I will examine the kinds of agency that are implied in the actual soul loss/stealing, what kind of being is a human or animal without a soul, and whether it makes sense to speak about suicide at all if agency in the suicidal act is postulated outside of the suicidal subject. The purpose of this chapter is to rethink the local concept of human personhood in relation to agency in suicide.

Suicide in Altai, Personhood, and Soul Loss

The Altai Republic has got one of the highest suicide rates in the Russian Federation; in 1998 there were 84.4 suicides per 100,000, and in 2010 64.3.[4] As a researcher, I could not help noticing that suicide was an issue of concern to my informants. Associated with pain and tears when referring to the deaths of loved ones, talk of suicide did not reveal any specific moral condemnation.[5] In fact, I did not observe any "ostracizing" of suicides among inhabitants of the Ulagan region; they were not excluded from proper burial, and their corpses were handled in an ordinary way. What struck me, however, was the categorical fuzziness or permeability of suicide discourse in Ulagan region.[6]

Though my Altaian informants were aware of the Russian terms *samoubiistvo* (literally "self-murder") and *suitsid* (from the Latin *suicidium*, used in medical discourse), they were more likely to use the Altaian expression *boiyna kol salynar* (literally "hold out his hand upon himself") or expressions derived from the means

4 During the 1990s, the Russian Federation witnessed an increase in mortality rate "unprecedented in a modern industrialised country in peacetime" (Men et al. 2003: 6), which was accounted for by "changes in mortality from vascular disease and violent deaths (mainly suicides, homicides, unintentional poisoning, and traffic incidents) among young and middle aged adults" (Men et al. 2003: 1).

5 This may seem somewhat surprising given that Orthodox Christianity is nominally strong among Altaians in Ulagan. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere (Broz 2009), the western concepts of religion and denomination are not at all easy to apply in places like Ulagan. I am consciously abstracting here from the probable stance of several Orthodox Christians of the Ulagan region who are anti-syncretistic in their views.

6 I am indebted to my colleague Agnieszka Halemba, who drew my attention to this fuzziness even before I started my doctoral fieldwork in 2004.

used (e.g. hanged, shot, cut). Yet very often people employed the word *jetker* (roughly translatable as "misfortune") to speak about suicide cases in the same way as they did about unfortunate events, accidents, or even murders. This suggests that even though people comprehend the category of suicide, they simultaneously subscribe to a different etiological categorization of death to that of a western ethnographer or the bureau of statistics of the state in which they live. When my friends confided that there had been a *jetker* in someone's family, I learned that the term refers to misfortune with an evil, dark cause behind it rather than to an unfortunate coincidence. In other words, the local category of *jetker* makes sense because it postulates certain alike mechanisms behind each death called *jetker*. To elaborate on these mechanisms, I offer the following short account of a suicide from my data:

> Ludek: Andrei told me that a man shot himself at a *stoianka* [herding camp] just a few days ago.
>
> Anatolii: It was my nephew. Once he came back from a hunt in Taiga and told people that he had met such a pretty girl that it was impossible even to describe her. He said that she had stolen his *süne* [soul]. For sure. A few days later they were sitting in the *aiyl* [Altaian six-angled house] and he asked the others to go out in order to let him change his underwear. And suddenly whack! He shot himself. It was a genuine *aldachy* that girl, a *körmös*.

This is just one of many narratives I came across that pursue the following scheme: first, a person meets dead people, spots a stranger (e.g. the pretty girl in the story above), has his or her horse or car stopped by an invisible force (*turgak*), or loses his or her personal belongings without explanation, only for them to later reappear in their usual place; then, after some time, usually no longer than a year, the person dies. The death, I am arguing, is interpreted in such narratives as the result of "soul loss."[7] To clarify this contention, I will first introduce the entity that is seen as predating the "soul" before reflecting on the concept of a person as a multiple being vulnerable to "soul loss."

An entity that seems to stand at the beginning of a causal chain, such as that invoked in the narrative above, is euphemistically referred to as *neme* (literally "a thing") or more directly as *körmös* (evil spirit). According to linguists, the original meaning of the term *körmös* is "invisible," and in its current manifestation it indeed denotes entities that are invisible or rather unperceivable by human physical senses under normal everyday conditions. The dichotomy of normality vs. abnormality is key here, being embedded in the contrast between ordinary and extraordinary situations, places, people, and stories. The invisibility of *körmös* is associated with normality, while its visibility with abnormality; hence, the

7 For further data concerning soul loss/kidnapping in the Altaian context, see Halemba (2006). For analysis of soul and vitality loss among the Yolomo Sherpas of Nepal, see Desjarlais (1992: 135–56).

two realms are differentiated (Humphrey 1996: 76). The ability to perceive the otherwise unperceivable is, in the Altaian context, well described and linked to the concept of knowing. People endowed with the ability to perceive invisible/unperceivable things and beings are called *neme biler ulus* ("people who know *neme*"). Those who can see them are referred to as *kösmökchi* (*kös* means "eye" and is combined here with an agent suffix), but there are other names for *biler ulus* derived in the same way from the particular sensory channel they employ (e.g. touch, hearing) (see D'iakonova 2001: 198; Halemba 2006: 147–50). Normal (*bilbez*, literally "not knowing") people can also see or in some other way perceive *neme*, albeit rarely. This occurs in extraordinary and often dangerous situations, as described in the above narrative, as well as in dreams.

I shall now turn to the human person and the mechanics of the threat posed by interaction with *neme.* Most people in Ulagan subscribe to the idea of a duality or rather a multiplicity of the human person.[8] Every visible human being is seen as an index of its hidden and, under a normal regime of perceivability, invisible aspects. There are numerous terms in Altaian that are translated as soul, double, shadow, breathing, and so on and a body of literature (mostly in Russian) that interprets them and systematizes them, claiming that in traditional Altaian worldview humans have seven kinds of soul (see for example Muitueva 2004: 123–4; Baskakov and IAimova 1993: 8–20).[9]

Süne and *tyn* were the most widespread terms used to denote "soul(s)" among my informants. All other terms were used less often and usually in specific collocations, such that they might be seen as stressing particular aspects of the invisible "other." On the one hand, the invisible alter ego is imagined as the non-detachable essence of life, often referred to as *tyn* (which also means breath). On the other hand, the invisible alter ego is imagined as detachable, referred to as *süne* or *jula*. Even though the invisibility of "the other" is the basic premise in both expressions, this invisibility only makes sense when it is knowable and thus attachable to other concepts and stories. Therefore, wandering "souls" can be perceived under extraordinary circumstances just as can *körmös*, euphemistically referred to as *neme*. In fact, wandering souls of all kinds are generally referred to as *neme*.[10]

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8 This is obviously an approximation. By this claim I do not mean to homogenize either the plurality of local Altaian views or the plurality of views in the so-called West. I agree with Carsten's suggestion that the strong contrast "between the Western bounded and autonomous individual and the non-Western 'joined-up' person" (2003: 87), often invoked by anthropologists, ignores the "everyday sense of relationality" in the so-called West, which is intertwined with a concept of person that is joined-up (2003: 101–7).

9 Given my findings, which are confirmed by those of D'iakonova (2001) and Halemba (2006: 145–6), I would be much more careful in implying an elaborate theological system. Rather than attempting to formulate definitions, which are misleading in their preciseness, I shall aim at retrieving from my data patterns in the use of such multiple terms.

10 Halemba suggests that both *süne* (soul) as well as *körmös* (evil spirit) are indices of the occult (2006: 145–6), which explains why they could both be referred to by the same euphemism, *neme* (a thing).

The uncanny, "unfocused" (Lambek 1996: 237) *neme* takes on two roles. On the one hand, there is the aspect of the person/victim of the narrative that is stolen or lost (often referred to with the term *süne*, as was the case in the preceding suicide narrative). On the other hand, there is the entity predating *süne*, which is given the title of *aldachy* (derived from the verb root *al*-, "to take"), which is best translated as "snatcher."[11] In the classical ethnographic literature, *aldachy* is interpreted as an Altaian version of the spirit of death (Anokhin 1994: 20–21). I suggest that the term is used to describe a role rather than a kind of entity. My informants often agreed that someone's ill fate was caused by an encounter with *aldachy*. The actual identity of the entity—it could be the soul-double of a dead person, an evil spirit from the underworld, an angry land master, and so on—is usually impossible to determine or agree upon.

The most important premise for my interpretation is that the detachment of *süne* is seen as causing harm in the long term. One simply cannot survive for long without this important aspect of oneself. Unless *süne* is retrieved—a task delegated to a *kam* (shaman)—death is inescapable. The actual mode of death varies; soul-double loss can lead to accidents, illness, murders, and indeed suicides. Hence, it is my contention that the supposed deep cause in common—soul-double loss—is the reason why my informants recognize these very different kinds of death as similar and label them with a common term, *jetker* (misfortune).

Having explained the local notion of soul-double loss, I now want to return to the events discussed at the start of this chapter: a chain of deaths in Kara village that was followed—for me rather unexpectedly—by a wedding. I never managed to get a direct explanation of this sequence from my acquaintances in Kara village. My close friends from Ulagan suggested that the wedding, which would otherwise be postponed due to funerals and commemorations, was intended to disrupt the chain of deaths. I spent a good deal of time trying to comprehend the logic behind this understanding, and I suspect that one possible clue lies in the question of agency.

In parallel with its common use in linguistics, Schnepel suggested that perhaps the term "agency" in general can be reconceptualized as part of a dialectical pair of agency and patiency. Agency stands for action and patiency for *passio* or passivity (Schnepel 2005: 217–18, 2009). In light of what I have described above, I want to suggest that *süne* (soul-double) plays the role of a patient in this dialectical pair, while the evil entity *aldachy* (the stealer, kidnapper, or snatcher) is the agent. The epidemic of death in Kara placed all members of the community into a state of *passio*. Their everyday lives were ruled by the funerary conduct: three days and nights of guarding the corpse, the funeral itself, and separate commemorations nine days, 40 days, and a year after the death (see also D'iakonova 2001: 190–99). Everyone followed the given paths, which were set off by the evil agent who had caused the original death.[12]

11 I am grateful to Piers Vitebsky for suggesting the English equivalent.

12 It is, I believe, revealing that I witnessed this countermeasure in the tiny Kara village, where the entire community participates in funerals and weddings, rather than in much larger Ulagan, where this is not so.

In order for the community to be liberated from the structural role of a patient—a role that is uncomfortably close to being the next victim—something contradictory, "non-customary" was organized: a wedding. In celebrating a wedding, villagers follow a different customary path in the belief that they are in charge of setting against the funeral-mourning path. This may account for one of my Altaian friends' claims that a wedding is meant to "cut the chain of funerals."

If I am right, and suicides are locally labeled as *jetker* because an external evil agent steals the soul-double of the victim, then the Durkheimian understanding of suicide has little purchase in the Altaian context. Agency lies more firmly and decisively with *aldachy* (snatcher, evil agent), the *kam* (shaman) attempting to retrieve the lost/stolen soul-double, or the community undertaking the countermeasure. Can we, in the Altaian context of soul-double loss, see the suicidal subject as an author of its own death, as intending and comprehending, as Durkheim would have it? To attend to these questions, I will now examine the role ascribed to the victim in soul-double loss to understand what kind of agent and subject we find in the temporal window between soul-double loss and actual death.

(Self-)Sacrifice

Apart from people who converted to Evangelical Christianity, the majority of my informants in Ulagan agreed that the soul-double should be retrieved by a spiritual specialist, despite the fact that they thought that such people no longer existed.[13] The following story neatly captures this point of view. It was told to me by my friend Genadii and relates to an episode in the late 1920s or early 1930s, when Genadji's father (then a boy) had been working in a herding camp where a young man was shot following a quarrel. A *kam* (shaman) was called to assist, as the injured man was in a serious condition. When he arrived beating his drum the door of their *aiyl* started swinging violently. Then he sent all of the people out of the *aiyl* while he remained inside with the shot youth, prolonging the healing ritual. Once everything was over he spoke to the father of the young man. He said that the patient would survive but that a spectacular white horse belonging to the father would soon go missing. The *kam* ordered the father not to search for it. Sure enough, the patient soon recovered and the white horse disappeared. Although happy that his son had survived, the father nevertheless lamented the loss of such an animal and went out to look for it. After a day of tracking, he discovered the corpse of the horse lying next to a big stone up on the mountain tundra, yet there were no clues as to the cause of death. In another version of this story that I came across, the horse stabbed itself by running against a sharp branch in the forest.

13 Interestingly, Potanin (1883), writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, also noted the skepticism among his informants in the region with regard to their contemporary shamans, who, unlike the great shamans of the past, were seen as mere tricksters.

The horse, my informants said, died instead of the injured man; the soul of the horse was exchanged (*solygan*) for the soul of the dying man.[14]

It is unclear from this narrative whether the soul-double of the injured man was lost prior to the violent quarrel or whether it happened as a result of it. According to Genadii, both were possible. In fact, it matters little which explanation one employs as none of them excuses the human murderer; rather, it simply places the victim on a causal trajectory that is seen locally as a meaningful framing of the event. The lack of agency of the dying man is stressed in the narrative by his physical helplessness. The narrative nevertheless contributes toward our understanding of the state of soul-double loss in yet another way. An animal sacrifice without actual slaughter presents a striking parallel between the sacrificed animal and a human who lost his or her soul-double. It teaches us that animals are conceptualized as multiple beings as much as humans are, and that taking away an important part of them—their soul-double—results in the same end. A multiple being missing its vital component inevitably heads toward disaster, which may materialize in various forms. In the case of the horse, this is illustrated by the two versions of the story, which closely correspond with soul-double loss in humans linked to suicides, accidents, or even murders. How should we interpret the parallel between humans and animals with regard to the loss of the soul-double? Should the human deprived of a soul-double be seen as losing its human reflexive agency and becoming like an animal? Or, alternatively, considering the account of the horse stabbing itself, should we speak about animal suicide in the same way as we speak about human suicide in the Altaian context? The following data suggest that the latter may be more apposite.

To explain my point further, I want to offer another story. Once during my fieldwork, I discovered that my friend's mother's cow had died. It was early spring, a particularly harsh season for cattle, which, exhausted after the winter, are forced to wait for the first green grass to appear. I heard various explanations for the cow's death: malnutrition, eating rubbish, and even that it had in fact been slaughtered.[15] Shortly after this incident, my friend's mother fell ill. She was transferred to a hospital in the republic's capital and spent several weeks there, with her life being in serious danger. At this point, people in the village started to talk loudly about something that was apparently present yet previously unnoticed in their consciousness. Some individuals now clearly asserted that the real cause of the cow's death lay elsewhere—it died instead of its mistress. When I enquired about

14 Classical nineteenth-century sources also speak about soul-double retrieval by *kams* (e.g. Potanin 1883). Such retrieval was achieved by means of an animal sacrifice conducted as part of the *taiylgan* ceremony. Our knowledge of this phenomenon is limited, yet there is one underlying principle that is lurking in both historical records as well as present discourse on soul-double retrieval, namely, *solynty* (substitution).

15 I was told this by the friend's mother when I found out that they had sold the meat to Russian merchants. She apparently felt ashamed to be seen to be selling meat from carrion. For a similar account of meat from ill animals being sold to Russians by Eveny reindeer herders, see Vitebsky (2005: 73).

this, I was told that people never lament when a cow or a horse dies suddenly for no apparent reason. Such an animal dies instead of its female (or male in the case of horse) master (*eezi*), taking upon itself an evil eye, curse, or similar perilous burden that might have resulted in the illness and eventual death of the master.

Such cases make it even more tempting to interpret the local understanding of animals as capable of self-sacrifice, according to Durkheim's nomenclature a kind of suicide (Durkheim 1952: xii). We should nevertheless be careful. As I have argued elsewhere (Broz 2007: 294–5), animals are not universally or readily understood as having subjectivity and intentionality in the Altaian context. Most of the time they are perceived as principally different from people. Focusing more closely on the local conceptualization of animals sheds light on how Durkheim's decision to leave animals out of the category of suicide (Durkheim 1952: xii) plays out in the Altaian context and contributes toward a better understanding of human personhood and hence to the question of what kind of person is one whose soul-double was lost or stolen and who subsequently committed suicide.

I have pointed out elsewhere that there is not a single word in Altaian that could be translated as "animal." Rather, there are two categories, *mal* and *aŋ*, referring to domestic and wild animals respectively (Broz 2007). Importantly, the two categories seem to be context dependent. Thus, what is *aŋ* (wild animal) for a human (*kizhi*) might be *mal* (domestic animal) for a local master spirit, which has severe implications for hunting (Broz and Willerslev 2012; Broz 2007). At the same time, the word *mal* has an archaic meaning of belonging and figures in the semantic pair *mal* and *eezi* (i.e. belonging/domestic animal and owner/master). Treatment of *mal* by its *eezi* is guided by moral rules that pertain to the mode of slaughter. The relationship nevertheless goes beyond ownership with moral obligation to the form of relationship that is arguably more metaphysical.

The story of the unfortunate cow suggests something important about the *eezi-mal* relationship, namely that *mal* can represent its *eezi*; it can substitute it. Thus, the logic of substitution that is associated with the concept of sacrifice (with or without actual slaughter) and soul-double retrieval seems to be innate to the *eezi-mal* relationship (i.e. to the local concept of ownership).[16] This aspect of ownership is actualized in the Altaian custom of giving domestic animals: ideally, an uncle from the mother's side (*taai*) would give a cow to a girl or a horse (or rifle) to a boy when they enter the world of adults. *Mal* giving could be interpreted as upgrading the status of a child to that of a grown-up *eezi*—master and owner of *mal* who is also protected by their charge.[17]

16 Marx's concept of ownership was interpreted by Žižek in a strikingly similar way. According to him, apart from the humanist opposition between things and human beings, beneath Marx's notion there "lurks another, much more productive notion, that of the mystery of substitution and/or displacement" (Žižek n.d.).

17 According to this logic, giving *mal* in such a way is the opposite of sacrifice or consecration, where the giver receives rewards, in that here it is the receiver who gains an additional non-material value—protection by the newly acquired double, which is available for substituting its master if needed be.

It is apparent that an important aspect of giving *mal* as a form of protection is its kinship dimension with its emphasis on seniority/juniority.[18] There is nevertheless another twist to the logic: in extreme situations, a relative can himself or herself act as *mal* (i.e. die instead of his or her relative),[19] which implies a certain similarity between *eezi-mal* bonds and kinship bonds. I was told a family story about a powerful *kam*, Jimesh, who did many remarkable things in 1920s and 1930s. My informant explained how this *kam*, having foreseen his brother's death and knowing that he had a large family to feed, decided to die in place of his sibling. This calls to mind a similar story from thirteenth-century Mongolia, in which Tolui sacrifices himself on behalf of his elder brother, Ögedei Khan.[20] Seniority/juniority is an important part of kin relations and terminology in Altai as it was (and still is) in Mongolia. We should note however, that in the custom of *mal* giving the benefactor is the junior, while in the tale from Mongolia benefactor was the senior. Thus we can speculate that while subordinates (human as well as non-human) can protect their master by sacrificing themselves, the master can protect his or her subordinate by giving someone/something subordinate to him or her. In this context, it is worth noting that in "pre-modern times" in broader Inner Asia, "people and livestock used to be the major kind of property" (Humphrey 1999: 63).

Detached from the example of a cow dying on behalf of its mistress, an interpretation of Jimesh's or Tolui's death as self-sacrifice would resonate with Durkheim's views. According to Durkheim, in societies with "insufficient" or "rudimentary" individuation, which are characterized by "massive cohesion," altruistic suicide is very common:

> This sacrifice then is imposed by society for social ends. If the follower must not survive his chief or the servant his prince, this is because so strict an interdependence between followers and chiefs, officers and king, is involved in the constitution of the society that any thought of separation is out of the question. The destiny of one must be that of the others. Subjects as well as clothing and armor must follow their master wherever he goes, even beyond the tomb. (Durkheim 1952: 178)

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18 Seniors are addressed with the use of *sler* (i.e. second person plural), while juniors are addressed with *sen* (i.e. second person singular). Members of one's mother's clan (*söök*) are always seen as senior regardless of their age. Within one's own clan, seniority/juniority is determined by relative age, and there is no sense of a cohort. Clan members older than ego are senior while those younger are junior. The use of *sen*/*sler* is therefore nonreciprocal.

19 This is in fact an opposite action to naming a friend whose soul would *kam* exchange for the soul of the patient/client (Potanin 1883: 87).

20 This story is related in *The Sacred History of the Mongols* (Onon 2001), a thirteenth-century Mongolian account of the life of Chinggis Khan, his ancestors, and his descendants. Ögedei Khan is, according to its records, saved by Tolui, who satisfied an angry local spirit and died voluntarily instead of his elder brother (Onon 2001: 264–6; Humphrey and Hürelbaatar 2005: 23–5; Humble 2010).

The above excerpt illustrates the tension in the category of suicide addressed in the introduction to this volume. On the one hand, Durkheim's starting point is the individual, who is an intentional, reflexive social agent. On the other hand, social structures and power constrain such individuals (1952: 241). In light of this, I am suggesting that we can use the ethnographic evidence presented here together with Durkheim's vague example as a way of thinking through agency and personhood as distributed, relational. Instead of taking as a starting point individuals and demonstrate how in a specific social context they are intertwined with and socially bound to one another, we could flip the perspective and start from asking what the social agents are composed of. By viewing the master as comprising his clothing, armor, wives, or servants, we could understand his person as distributed over those elements of the relational field (Law 1997). At the same time, such a figure is himself an element in the relational field of the distributed personhood of others (see also Holbraad and Pedersen 2009: 374).

Halemba, in her discussion of personhood and landscape in Altai, suggests that "*kizhi* (a human being) is … not stable, but at any given moment should be viewed as a composition of different aspects of personhood" (2006: 150). My data confirm the meaningfulness of this interpretation. The Altaian expression for dying is *tyn chykkan*, literally *tyn* (breath, living force) escaped the body. Another, more frequently used expression is that someone *bozhot kalgan*, meaning that someone has literally ended. Yet the *süne* (soul-double) continues its existence after one's death. Following Halemba, I am arguing that what ends is the unique aggregate of *tyn*, *süne*, body, and other aspects of the person. I am also arguing that the term *mal* could be contextually treated as part of this aggregate (i.e. as the aspect of personhood of its *eezi*).[21] If *eezi*'s personhood is distributed onto *mal* (animal, subordinate, belonging), it makes sense to think of *mal* as exercising agency. In other words, agency is exercised on behalf of someone else, as in the common use of the word (e.g. artist's agent) (see Laidlaw 2010: 148). In this sense, the (non-human) *mal* is endowed with the (human) agency of its *eezi*. Hence, the Durkheimian question of whether animals have agency and can therefore commit suicide could be answered in the following way: yes, but it is the human agency of their masters.[22]

21 Humphrey describes the Mongolian practice of taking rings, watches, or necklaces away from a dying person for fear that the latter is too attached to them. Taking away these objects of attachment "is held to pacify the dying, to allow them to die" (Humphrey 1999: 60). This leads me to believe that in the Mongolian context we can also view the person as a unique aggregate of body, soul-doubles, and what is normally seen as belonging, which is dissolved by death. Yet sometimes the physical death does not lead to complete dissolution. Verbitskii mentions cases from nineteenth-century Altai when cattle was dying out because their dead human masters were taking them to the other world (1993: 97–8). In such cases, the association of the soul-double and their cattle is too durable, causing the latter to be drawn to the other world where the soul-double resides.

22 Any European whose dog has ever caused damage to other people would be aware how such an understanding operates in so-called Western contexts (see also Laidlaw 2010: 151).

Could it be that the suicidal human is in a certain sense enacting the agency of *aldachy* who snatched its soul-double as much as the domestic animal (*mal*) is enacting the agency of its master (*eezi*)? While this may well be the case, the picture changes if we consider my interpretation of the wedding as a countermeasure. While *eezi* possesses its *mal*, turns it into part of its distributed person, and makes it execute his or her agency, *aldachy* features in a one-off encounter that results in the absence of the soul-double. *Aldachy* is gone by the end of the interaction. It is not conceptualized as present and as possessing the victim. The only healing option seems to be the retrieval of the soul-double, not an exorcism of *aldachy*. This is in contrast with the local idiom regarding the possession of *kams*, tellers of heroic epics (*kaichy*), and other creative masters (*us kizhi*) by various spirits (see Broz 2011).

The (self-)sacrifice of *mal* could be seen as sacrifice of one part of the distributed subject on behalf of the whole aggregate person. When hair from a horse's mane is offered to the local master spirit instead of the entire horse, the latter stands for yet another whole—the distributed person of its master. Thus, the main reason why not to speak about animal self-sacrifice in the Altaian context is not the conceptual ambiguity with regard to animal agency/intentionality, but rather the impossibility to distinguish between self-sacrifice of an animal and "partial" self-sacrifice/suicide of its master.[23]

At every level of the composite person we can see the same principle of substitution at work. Yet such fractal symmetry is only superficial, because different parts of the person seem to have different roles and significance. For example, not all parts of the distributed person are detachable to the same degree: one can leave a hair from a horse's mane, but leaving a leg, which is irreplaceable, would be absurd. Equally, loss of *tyn* (breath, i.e. the non-detachable soul-double) means the end for ordinary people (the heroes from Altaian epics are notable exception). Loss of *süne* (the detachable soul-double) also means the (eventual) end, yet such a loss may not incapacitate the person for a year or more, as discussed above. In contrast, detachment of *mal* (cattle, belonging) is usually as harmless for the person as the removal of hair is for a horse. Moreover, in certain cases this detachment can be very beneficial for the composite person, as it can secure the latter's continuation, survival. People traveling through the landscape constantly make offerings of things that stand for them in a chain of representation.[24] In this

23 Here I am getting very close to Evans-Pritchard's interpretation of Nuer sacrifice. He claims that "when Nuer give their cattle in sacrifice they are very much, and in a very intimate way, giving part of themselves" (1956: 279). What is more, since among the Nuer a man identifies not only with the victim but also with the spear used for sacrificing the beast (1956: 272), we can say that Nuer sacrifice is therefore always fundamentally a self-sacrifice, which sheds further light on the topic of (animal) self-sacrifice (see also Willerslev 2009).

24 The vast majority of my informants, for example, regularly tie ribbons made of new cloth (*jalama*) when traveling through the landscape. The reasons behind this practice

sense, it seems that life in Altai consists of a chain of partial self-sacrifices in which the aggregate person sacrifices its parts to metonymically substitute the whole and prolong its existence, thus, in Willerslev's words, manipulating time to postpone the inevitable death (2009: 699). Failure to do this correctly could easily lead to situations like that which befell the man in Taiga whose soul was stolen by the *körmös* in the guise of a girl, and who ended up shooting himself in the herding camp. This is all well and good, but what can we make of the human victim's role in the actual soul-double loss?

Two Kinds of Death

If, following the locally used Russian word *samoubiistvo* (self-murder), we think of suicide as murder, then it represents a special case of the act where murderer and victim are the same person. Grammatically, it corresponds with the notion of the reflexive verb, whose semantic agent and patient are the same. If we use the analogy between suicide and murder linked to soul-double loss, we can expect that the suicide subject would be blamed for taking his or her life as much as the "ordinary murderer," because the invocation of soul-double loss does not constitute an excuse for the "ordinary murderer" either. The Altaian ethnographer Valentina Muitueva suggests that, according to what she calls the "traditional Altaian worldview," "the most serious *kinchek* [sin] is to break the chain, cycle of life" (2004: 131). This can be committed in the form of murder, self-murder, dying when drunk, or never marrying. My observation of the relative lack of moral condemnation of suicide among my informants nevertheless suggests that the decision making of someone without a soul-double is seen as problematic. The question that remains, though, is whether people in the Altaian context could be seen as somewhat agentively involved and therefore responsible for their soul-double loss. To address this issue, I want to return to the local etiology of death.

In his classic account of shamanism in Altai, A.V. Anokhin claims that humans die for two reasons: either as a result of the voraciousness (*alchnost'*) of the ruler of the underworld, Erlik, or as a result of the decision of a tribunal consisting of Erlik and the ruler of the upper world, Ülgen. The former is regarded as the cause of premature death, which might be avoided by making sacrifice to Erlik; the latter is regarded as unavoidable (Anokhin 1994: 20; see also Muitueva 2004).[25] Although such assertions recall the construction of cosmology out of diverse experiences and hence should be treated with extreme caution, they express something similar

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are complex (see Halemba 2006: 62–87; Broz 2007: 297), but it is almost certainly a protective measure. *Jalama* ribbons represent horse manes and thus horses, which in turn, as argued above, connote the horses' master.

25 In neighboring Mongolia lamas determine whether the deceased lived the "destined lifespan or died early" (Humphrey 1999: 67), which seems likewise to refer to the idea of there being two kinds of death.

to what my informants conveyed to me. For example, I was once told by one of my friends who had lost her daughter that she always knew the girl would not live a long life. It was her destiny, she said. However, despite such "fatalism" people obviously struggle to avert death: they avoid dangerous places, go to doctors as well as healers, and so on. The notions of death and destiny, which are at the heart of Anokhin's argument about Ülgen and Erlik, seems clearly present also in my informants' views. These notions allow for both determinism and open-endedness. In other words, there seems to be a space to exercise agency in shaping one's own future as well as a space to relinquish it (often ex post facto) and be placed on a pre-ordained path. In painful circumstances such as loss of my friend's daughter, subscription to the "destined death" concept is therapeutic (see also Vitebsky 1993) and helps one to deal with potential self-blame (see Flora 2012).

Importantly, none of the forms in which death might come (e.g. illness, accident, murder, or suicide) seems to be exclusively associated with either death as destiny or premature death.[26] Thus, the two kinds of death are treated locally as ontologically distinct phenomena akin to homonyms (i.e. words that have the same X and Y but mean different things). However, while homonyms are in most cases distinguished by their contexts, the situation is somewhat different for the two kinds of death.

I now want to return to the example of the man who shot himself after meeting a beautiful girl who turned out to be an evil spirit (*körmös*). When I asked Anatolii why he thought the evil spirit had stolen the soul-double of this man—his nephew—he told me that it was hard to say. "Perhaps my nephew hunted where he was not meant to. Or simply was not careful enough," he continued. In fact, many narratives of soul-double loss that I came across featured hunters. In such accounts, excessive hunting success followed by the death of the hunter could mean two possible things: either the person violated hunting ethics and was punished by the angry spirit masters of the place (*jerdiŋ eeleri*), or his destined life was coming to an end and he was given the remainder of the game that he was destined to hunt during his lifetime. While in the former case, the hunting success causes the death, in the latter case, it is the advent of death that causes the hunting success. Thus, as Broz and Willerslev argue (2012), hunting success represents two different phenomena: success authorized by local spirit masters and success not authorized by local spirit masters. The two are homonyms, just as are the two kinds of death.

To put it the other way round, we can conclude that the context that distinguishes the two homonymous kinds of death might itself be homonymous. This in fact makes definite distinctions impossible. What matters is the actual or potential shifting between the two meanings, a function of the local explanatory economy that is fundamentally narrative. In this context, casting blame on the suicidal

26 Such a split between morphology and etiology parallels the split suggested by Durkheim when discussing correspondences between his four major kinds of suicide and the actual means of committing suicide (Gane 2005: 232–3).

subject, or for that matter on anyone whose death is labeled as *jetker* and is seen as having been caused by soul-double loss, is destined to be problematic. Such a death could never serve as evidence of previous ill deeds on the part of the suicide, as one could not rule out the possibility that the death was simply preordained.

Conclusion

This chapter started by postulating a certain tension in Durkheim's understanding of suicide that continues to operate to this day in Western suicidology: a tension between ascribing the agency and authorship of the act of self-killing to the suicidal subject on the one hand and to an external cause, entity, or power on the other. The act of explanation thus potentially erodes the agency/authorship of the suicidal subject, despite this being crucial for defining and distinguishing suicide.

In the course of my discussion, I established that a similar tension is present in the Altaian context. Prolonging the invoked causal chain to the moment of soul-double loss erodes the suicidal subject. What is more, animals seem to be subjected to similar erosion, which opens the question of animal suicide. However, it has been shown that, rather than extending the category of suicide in the Altaian context to accommodate animals as well as humans, it makes more sense to rethink the local concept of human personhood to subsume animals, artifacts, or other people. Where a person is seen as a composite/aggregate entity, the following question arises: what kind of an agent is the person who lacks an important part of self. The inevitability of the death of someone missing his or her soul-double seems to divest that person of a considerable part of his or her agency in relation to his or her self-inflicted (or other) death. This loss of agency on the part of the suicidal subject, seen in this light as occupying the *passio* slot, led me to interpret the wedding as a countermeasure to the chain of death in the Kara village. Through this countermeasure, I have argued, members of the local community sought to reclaim agency by structurally removing themselves from the *passio* slot and thereby reducing the likelihood that they would be victims in the future.

Interpreting suicide with reference to a causal chain invoking soul-double loss does not simply erode the suicidal subject and his/her agentive involvement in the act of self-harm. Rather, such causal chains could be, and often were, prolonged by my Altaian informants to help the suicidal subject regain some agency. The suicidal subject, and in fact anyone whose death is locally interpreted as having been caused by soul-double loss, is seen as playing different roles in the deadly encounter with *aldachy*—the snatcher of the soul-double. If, on the one hand, a death is interpreted as being predetermined, the soul-double loss is seen as unavoidable, beyond agency of the person concerned. If, on the other hand, a death is seen as premature, it implies the agentive involvement of the victim. Either one has not been sufficiently careful to avoid evil places at dangerous times, or the soul-double loss was caused by one's bad deeds and represents a punishment from the angry master spirits of the place. Hence, any death interpreted as having been

caused by soul-double loss opens up the possibility that this was the fault of the victim, who has been punished for his or her bad deeds.

Such moral framing is never absolute, however. Morality implies choice and hence intentionality/agency. Yet the homonymous game with its two kinds of death facilitates the ascription of agency as well as its deprivation; in the Altaian context, the movement between the two is fluent and endless and it is hence impossible to ultimately decide whether the death was destined or premature, avoidable or unavoidable, in or out of anybody's agency. It is therefore unsurprising that I have never witnessed an absolute moral condemnation of the act of suicide as manifested in a distinct and definite treatment of the corpse.

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PART III
Self-Destruction and Power: Bodies, Resistance and Crises

Chapter 6

Farmers' Suicide and the Moral Economy of Agriculture: Victimhood, Voice, and Agro-Environmental Responsibility in South India

Daniel Münster[1]

One afternoon in August 2008, at the beginning of my first stage of field research into reports of farmers' suicide in Wayanad District, Kerala, I found myself in front of the huge desk of a senior agricultural researcher of the Ambalavayal Regional Agricultural Research Station[2] (RARS). I had come to this particular region because Wayanad had in 2006 been declared a "suicide-prone district" by the Government of India and was described in the English-language press as a suicide hotspot.[3] I expected a straightforward confirmation of an epidemic of farmers' suicides from the research officer. However, when I raised the issue, he exclaimed with confidence: "No real farmer has committed suicide in Wayanad."

"Ninety-five percent of them [i.e. the suicides]," he continued, "borrow money to spend on some other purpose. Seventy-five to eighty-five percent of agrarian loans are not used for agricultural purposes. They spend it as dowry or for their children's education. A debt relief in Wayanad would only benefit undeserving elements." After having denied the reality of farmers' suicides, however, the research officer went on to talk about the decline of agriculture in Wayanad. As a metropolitan government officer stationed in this remote hill district—

1 The ethnographic fieldwork on which this chapter is based was funded by a travel grant from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (Germany) and was affiliated in India with the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Tiruvananthapuram, Kerala. I am indebted to my research assistants Shinoj K. Anthony and Joby Clement for their friendship, hospitality, and dedication to this research. This chapter has benefitted from the input of the participants at the suicide and agency workshop and in particular from critical readings by Ludek Broz, Ursula Münster, Julia Poerting, and James Staples. The usual disclaimers apply.

2 The research station was established in 1946 as part of the Wayanad Colonization Scheme, which supported the settlement of Wayanad's uncultivated forests by ex-servicemen of the British Indian Army. The station has thus been an integral part of Wayanad's agrarian modernization.

3 Most prominent among the reports were those of The Hindu's rural affairs editor P. Sainath (2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2004e, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

a "punishment area for officials"[4]—he positioned himself as an outside observer of the plight and moral decline of the Keralan farmer, which he explained as follows:

> Farmers overuse chemicals; … we failed to educate the farmers, now it is up to the owners of fertilizer shops to explain the chemicals … Chemicals in India are of bad quality; environmental degradation is at the heart of agrarian crisis. … I tell you the real reason for suicides: perennial crops have made farmers lazy. Wayanad is a showcase for this. It has the highest per capita income in Kerala, yet look at all the liquor they drink! They also have more mobile phones per capita. … Farmers have lost their sense for homestead farming. They continuously change their crop. Actually, rubber is not recommended for Wayanad, [but] still all farmers are destroying coffee plantations for rubber; … they should diversify and not only pursue the latest high prize.

Even though the officer was highly skeptical about farmers' suicides—an attitude that I came partly to share after a few months of field research[5] on the topic (Münster 2012)—the events in question nevertheless offered him an idiom with which he was able to raise certain issues about Wayanad's agriculture in terms of ecological crisis, morality, and responsibility. His statement that "no real farmer" had committed suicide did not prevent him from speculating about possible reasons for suicide among farmers. The issues he raised were recurring themes in the moral talk about farmers' suicides in the region, such as alcoholism, dysfunctional masculinities, gambling, the loss of the traditional farming ethos, the commercialization of agriculture, and the ecological decline of rice and homestead (*tōṭṭam*)[6] farming. The research officer's position, I argue, illustrates widespread interpretations of suicide that articulate with what I call a "moral economy of agriculture," that is, ideas of what is just, fair, and sustainable in farming. This moral economy of farming goes beyond questions of agency and resistance between subaltern producers and rent seeking elites by drawing attention to ethics of care for land, soil and other socionatures entangled in farming. The agency of the suicidal person is represented in terms of "responsibility" (see also Laidlaw 2010). Farmers are held responsible in these discourses for a general decline of agriculture and for violence to the landscape brought about by green revolution technologies and famers' "greedy" disposition toward mono-cropping of cash crops such as ginger (on the case of ginger growing see Münster 2015a).

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4 Most civil servants of Kerala State departments prefer to be stationed near the major cities of central and southern Kerala. It is a matter of discontent (and some amusement) among the people of Wayanad that many officials get transferred there for disciplinary reasons.

5 This chapter is based on nine months of (discontinuous) fieldwork in Wayanad between August 2008 and May 2011.

6 Malayalam transcription follows the ALA-LC romanization tables available at: http://loc.gov/catdir/cpso/roman.html.

I suggest that responsibility best represents an ethnographic notion of agency in etiologies of farmers' suicides. Moral responsibility marks a middle ground between the two extremes of a structure-and-agency continuum that Münster and Broz discuss in the introduction to this volume, a continuum that is, in the case of representations of farmers' suicides, perhaps better described as a victimhood-and-resistance continuum.

At one end of the continuum, suicides might be conceived as devoid of agency, with farmers understood as victims of larger structural processes. This is the discourse of many activists, journalists, and NGOs. At the other end of the continuum, one may be tempted to view farmers' suicides as acts that mark a space of freedom, an extreme form of political communication (Andriolo 2006) in which the suicidé voices accusations, indictments and dissent. In contrast to these opposing conceptions of agency in farmers' suicides as "victimhood" and political "voice," the notion of "responsibility" acknowledges farmers' collective agency in historically contributing to the very structures of crisis, distress, and despair. Or, to invoke E.P. Thompson, it supposes that the class of "farmers in distress" was present in its own making. In this chapter, I use the term "responsibility" not in the perhaps more common dictionary sense of being "sensible, trustworthy, and able to make good moral and practical judgments; opposite of irresponsible." Rather, I use it in the second sense of "having done or been the cause of esp. something bad; guilty" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). I am interested in tracing within local discourses about suicide a moral notion of farmers' responsibility for the agro-environment and what I call the moral economy of farming. All three notions of agency in farmers' suicides—victimhood, resistance, responsibility—could be discerned in local conversations around the issue as well as in media representations, which contributed to a widespread moral panic in relation to agriculture, the state, globalization, and farmers. Before I return to notions of agency, the moral dimension of the media hype around farmers' suicides deserves some attention.

Moral Panic

From approximately 2004 to 2008, Wayanad was the scene of a "moral panic" (Cohen 2004; Englund 2009) surrounding the apparent suicide of a number of indebted local farmers. The term "moral panic" refers to "outbreaks of public concern or alarm" (Ungar 2001: 171), usually greatly exaggerated and boosted by the mass media, about nascent threats to the fabric of society, such as terrorism, youth criminality, diseases—or suicide epidemics. Stanley Cohen's definition (2004: 1) is arguably the most popular:

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and

> stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (Cohen 2004: 1)

Most moral panic research is concerned with the elements of disproportion, exaggeration, and alarm with respect to the perceived threat, deviant behavior, or social evil (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009). In this chapter, I am not interested in the disproportionality and scandalization inherent in media representations of farmers' suicide. Instead, I follow David Garland in stressing two further dimensions of moral panics: "(i) the *moral* dimension of the social reaction, particularly the introspective soul-searching that accompanies these episodes; and (ii) the idea that the deviant conduct in question is somehow *symptomatic*" (Garland 2008: 11). I contend that farmers' suicides, although experienced firsthand by very few people in agrarian Wayanad, but blown out of proportion by a scandalizing media and a nexus of political interests and the NGO sector (see also Münster 2015b), nevertheless served as an important topos through which farmers engaged in moral reflection on their agrarian practices and their farming ethos. Farmers' suicides were widely recognized as symptoms of an ecological, economic, a moral crisis of neoliberalizing agriculture.

In Wayanad, the moral panic about farmers' suicides was not limited to the public spheres of media and political populism but also articulated with local assumptions about farmers and agency in suicide. I identified three popular notions of "agency" attributed to self-inflicted death among farmers emerging, namely, victimhood, voice, and responsibility. These three notions of agency are particularly conspicuous in discourses about farmers and suicide perhaps because of the morally laden ties between death and production, suicide and work that are absent in other types of suicide. Victimhood, voice, and responsibility emerge in discourses that put suicide and transforming agrarian production in the same framework of moral considerations. An analytical focus on the nexus between the political ecology of agriculture and self-inflicted death is complementary to other approaches to "self" and "person" in the study of rural suicides and to the literature on the moral discourses about "suicide in Kerala" (Halliburton 1998), which focuses on mainstream Malayalee society and interrogates the critical issue of middle-class-consumerism-education-and-migration, that is so central to the anthropology of Kerala (Lukose 2005, 2009; Osella and Osella 2000, 1999; specifically on suicide see Chua 2009; Chua 2011). Here, however, I wish to concentrate on the agrarian dimensions of suicide in Kerala. I aim to bring the anthropological work on South Indian suicide together with the critical study of agricultural production in India: its ongoing neoliberal restructuring, the role of new technologies, the legacy of the green revolution, and the materiality of agrarian production.

In this context, I suggest that an anthropological study of suicide may move beyond existing models, developed primarily by medical anthropologists[7] by attending to the influence of work and labor on the formation of suicidal subjectivities. More specifically, I would like to draw attention to the work and labor of farming at a frontier of capitalist agriculture. My use of the term labor gestures toward Karl Marx's broader (anthropological) sense of labor as "human metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) with nature." "Labour," writes Marx, is "a process between man [sic] and nature, a process by which man [sic], through his [sic] own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself [sic] and nature" (ct. in Foster 2000: 141).[8] In my ethnographic research conversations about suicides became occasion to speak about the work of farming, conversations about farming became in turn occasion to discuss the "metabolic rift" (Foster 1999, Schneider and McMichael 2010) in human relations to agro-environments. The moral talk about suicide, I contend, may be treated as a vernacular diagnostic of a crisis in an "agrarian environment" (Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2000). In Wayanad, arguably the most important contemporary moral debate concerns the (ecological) future of agriculture itself. The outrage over rural male suicide has become integrated into this larger debate. The understanding of suicidal agency as victimhood, voice, and responsibility was thus partly informed by the urgency of the agrarian question in the twenty-first century (Friedmann 2006). In the following sections I will briefly deal with understandings of suicidal agency in terms of victimhood and voice before turning to the question of responsibility. The subject of responsibility, I argue, best captures the common view of the suicide problematic in the context of Wayanad's agro-ecological crisis.

Farmers as Victims

From a methodological point of view, discourses about suicide should be treated as a sphere of cultural production that is to a great extent disconnected from the realities of actual suicide cases. However, precisely because these discourses do not have to deal with the contradictory and idiosyncratic realities of individual acts, they can offer access to shared articulations of "what went wrong." The challenge of making sense of suicide is faced not only by the families of the deceased but

7 Anthropological research on suicide has been undertaken by medical anthropologists, who have introduced a valuable conceptual focus on the politics of the body, social suffering, and medicalization.

8 In the first English edition of "Das Kapital" from 1887, the German notion of "Stoffwechsel" is translated not as metabolism but as "material re-actions": "Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man [sic] and Nature participate, and in which man [sic] of his [sic] own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself [sic] and Nature" (Marx 1887 [2010]: 124).

extends to the public at large. As argued by Münster and Broz in the introduction to this volume, suicide, as a "bad death" (Bloch and Parry 1982; Kearl 1989), in one way or the other sheds light on the society in which it happens. It is this moral and diagnostic element in suicide discourses that I am interested in here.

Attempts to ascertain the *real* reason for farmers' suicides have always seemed presumptuous to me. In Wayanad, a host of survey teams were seeking the single economic explanations for farmers' suicides, probing for correlations between debt and suicide, landholding and suicide, and so on (Jeromi 2007; Government of Kerala 2009; Nair and Menon 2009). Employees from a Christian charitable NGO were trained in psychological methods of "verbal autopsy" and a so-called befriending technology for getting access to the possible causes of suicide. My actual encounters with suicide cases—more than 50 visits to families and neighbors between 2008 and 2011—never produced any conclusive picture, not even "types" of suicide that would lend themselves to easy generalizations. It is well known that poverty, debt, hardly viable land holdings, and volatile crop prices produced widely shared existential anxieties that contributed in many cases to the suicide. Yet what appeared more worthy of attention than the structural etiology of suicide was the moral work that went into making sense of such acts.

Both the political debates and much of the social scientific literature[9] on the subject of farmers' suicides in India rely heavily on suicide statistics and indicators of economic distress. These structural interpretations construct farmers' suicides as a natural consequence of overwhelming debt and the forces of globalization behind this proliferation of rural indebtedness. When it comes to farmers confronting big structures such as global trade regimes their agency is obfuscated by black boxes such as "distress" or "crisis" that self-evidently trigger suicide. According to these victimizing narratives, crisis and debt "drive" farmers to suicide; their agency is ultimately effaced, and their actions reduced to victimhood.

My unease with these writings on farmers' suicides runs somewhat parallel to E.P. Thompson's seminal critique of structural approaches to social history. He introduced the concept of "moral economy" to the study of peasant food riots in eighteenth-century England in order to counter a "spasmodic view of popular history" (Thompson 1971) and introduce a perspective more sensitive to agency. According to Thompson, such riots and other forms of "direct public action" have been treated in the literature as nothing more than spasmodic reactions to distress. Subaltern agency thus disappears behind behavioral responses to "elementary economic stimuli." For Thompson, such perspectives build on an "abbreviated view of economic man" and are "guilty of crass economic reductionism, obliterating complexities of motives, behavior, and function" (Thompson 1971: 77).

9 Here I am mostly referring to publications in the journal *Economic and Political Weekly* since the late 1990s (e.g. Assadi 1998; Deshpande 2002; Jeromi 2007; Mishra 2006; Mohanakumar and Sharma 2006; Mohanty and Shroff 2004; Sridhar 2006; Vaidyanathan 2006). I have discussed this literature in more detail elsewhere (Münster 2015b).

Ethnographic understandings of farmers' suicides may be enriched, I argue, by an engagement with classical debates about moral economy and popular reactions to crises and the violence of economic transformation. James Scott has continued E.P. Thompson's study of the "affective and moral consciousness" (Thompson 2008 [1978]: 171) of the peasant, by asking "what makes them angry and what is likely, other things being equal, to generate an explosive situation?" (Scott 1976: 4). In Scott's early work the study of moral economy is a contribution to a "phenomenology of exploitation" (1976: 31, 160f.):

> If the analytical goal of a theory of exploitation is to reveal something about the perceptions of the exploited—about their sense of exploitation, their notion of justice, their anger—it must begin not with an abstract normative standard but with the values of the real actors. (1976: 160)

Taking inspiration from this theory of exploitation, I focus on the values of real farmers and their interpretations of what may have gone wrong in Wayanad's agrarian development. As I hope to show, their notions of justice and anger go beyond economic exploitation and include a sense of environmental injustice in neoliberalizing agriculture. This "moral economy of agriculture" articulates rural actors' views on the future of farming itself and the morality of human-nature relations. My expanded perspective on moral economy resonates with Dove and Kammen's notion of "moral ecology" about an "exchange of resources between people and the environment" (1997: 91). Also, Sarah Besky's notion of a "tripartite moral economy" among plantation workers in Darjeeling, which, according to Besky, involves "reciprocal relationships between labor, management, and the plantation landscape" (2014: 120) is similar to my concerns. Among the smallholders of Wayanad, their historical relationships to land and soil have become an issue of debate. Wayanad's moral discourses of crisis and suicide—the views of the agricultural officer discussed previously may serve as an example—rarely revolve around clear-cut issues of exploitation and victimization. For sure, there is a widespread sense of being neglected by the state (*sarkkār*) and being exploited by "cheating banks"[10] and of uncertainty in the face of unpredictable market prices. As the following discussion makes apparent, however, discursive representations of farmers as victims tend to be complicated by moral narratives of personal greed, consumerist aspirations, collective agro-ecological malpractice, and the risks of science and technology in agrarian production.

10 Among those who raised the issue was A.C. Varkey, the leader of Farmers Relief Forum (FRF) a farmers' movement that specializes in direct action protests. At the time, FRF was particularly active in preventing the execution of so-called recovery operations, through which banks recover the properties of defaulting lenders. To this end, FRF members would surround the houses of defaulters in a protective crowd or block the offices of regional bank managers.

Voicing Dissent: Suicide as Resistance

Just as farmers' suicides are not mere corollaries of external exploitation, they are also hardly manifestations of resistance. As I have argued elsewhere (Münster 2015b), it would be farfetched to interpret farmers' suicides as protests against banks, the state, or even globalization. Wayanad's farmer suicides are not "protest suicides" as defined by anthropologists Allen Feldman (1991) and Karin Andriolo (2006) as comprising a message, an audience, and a strategic objective. There is some evidence from other parts of India that farmers' suicides may entail explicit expressions of dissent. After all, suicide is a well-established part of South Asia's protest repertoire. Suicidal agency as "voice" would have to be inferred from suicide notes addressed to a higher official or politician or by committing suicide in public and/or "symbolic" locations (like a local agrarian office). However, no ethnographic evidence of individual suicides serving as "message" exists for Wayanad. Agency in these rural suicides seems to be less about political agency and the "voicing" of dissent, than about lived experiences of agrarian deadlocks and the conditions of agro-ecological crisis. Speaking of agency here means speaking of *responsibility*, of farmers' responsibility in taking too much financial risk for cash crops, and of the responsibility of settlers' agriculture for environmental destruction. The "phenomenology of agrarian crisis" involves farmers' sense of economic concerns such as indebtedness and volatile commodity prices as much as their notion of justice in regard to ecological issues such as the conversion of wet rice fields, chemicalization and soil depletion.

In Wayanad, violations of the rural moral economy seem to result not in collective "direct action" but in self-inflicted death. Both Thompson and Scott employ a Polanyian (Polanyi 2001) framework that understands rural production as "embedded" in moral rights and expectations of subsistence safety, manifest in traditional obligations (reciprocity, sharing) and entitlements (commons, harvest shares). This moral economy is disrupted by historical elite projects of introducing variants of "laissez-faire" capitalism. But how does the moral economy of rural producers look like in twenty-first-century South India? What are the expectations, aspirations, and notions of justice and fairness that prevail in a time and place where it no longer even makes sense to speak of non-capitalist subsistence farming (since most farmers produce non-food crops for the market) or, for that matter, of "peasants"? Mark Edelman (2005: 332) has recently argued that Scott's "right of subsistence" has "broadened to the 'right to continue being agriculturalists'":

> This means, in essence, the right to continue living from the land as well as the protection of a patrimony both of public-sector institutions, which made being an agriculturalist possible and which are now targeted by neoliberal privatizers, and of plant germplasm and cheese cultures, which peasants' antagonists now sometimes euphemize and covet as 'intellectual property.' (2005: 332)

While there is no evidence from Wayanad that individual suicides where carried out as a form of protest suicide, suicides nevertheless featured prominently in various

farmers' agitations between 2004 and 2006. Suicides were here discursively incorporated into agitations concerned with demands of debt relief and other government interventions. I heard no one claim that suicides would entail a continuation of farmers' protests through other means. But how did the people of Wayanad actually speak of farmer suicides? How did they make sense of death and the agrarian situation? As I will show in the next section, many farmers, sharing their interpretation of the suicide epidemic, where quick to point out their personal and collective responsibility for the dire state of Wayanad's agrarian environment.

The Moral Economy of Agriculture: Suicide and Agro-Ecological Responsibility

In Wayanad the common moral discourse about farming and suicide varies according to class, generation, and community. Take the case of Mathew, a typical Christian settler in his early 70s. Mathew was a child when his parents migrated in the 1940s to Wayanad's Pulpally region, which since 2004 has become infamous as a suicide hotspot. From the agrarian capital that he accumulated in the 1980s, Mathew was able to construct a huge marble-floored villa for his family. Mathew is thus a member of the rural Christian elite: he owns two cars and three motorcycles in addition to 20 acres of land, does well economically, and is proud to be unaffected by crisis. Nonetheless, his livelihood has suffered as a result of the drought that has slowly spread to Kerala from the Karnataka Deccan over the past ten years due to dwindling forest cover and the change in the region's microclimate. I spent a great deal of time with Matthew while doing fieldwork on agrarian change in the region. Sharing sweet coffee and cookies with me in his large living room, Mathew would talk about the art and ethos of being a good farmer. He explained how almost anything used to grow in Wayanad, how the soil used to be fertile and rains abundant. He told me how the Christian pioneers experimented with numerous different crops such as lemongrass and how one Christian family in his neighborhood had brought samples of pepper vines from the Travancore region in 1968: "With the first pepper, everything changed. Everybody stopped lemongrass and shifted to pepper, coconut, and rubber." From 1977 to 1985 farmers in the Pulpally region had fantastic yields and the pepper sacks would fill every room in the house, even their sleeping quarters.

In 1988 a "quick wilt" epidemic hit the first pepper vines and then the supporting plants. On the whole, however, agriculture remained viable: "We had high yields and labor was very cheap," explained Mathew. "At present we have a quarter of the yield and four times the labor cost." Mathew attributed the decline in *adivasi* labor to the lure of education and urban employment, noting that "they [*adivasis*] like to be in townships." Indeed, for Mathew, and many of the other wealthy farmers, the only major problem facing agriculture was the short supply of labor: "In the beginning we didn't have money but [we had] plenty of labor; now we have money but no laborers." This perspective also shaped his moral interpretation of suicides:

> I was never in a real crisis because I was always diversifying. I will never give up. Suicide is not the fault of others; it is the fault of the man himself. If he is playing out of control he is to blame. Agriculture is always profitable; we need to manage it well. If we mismanage, it will get out of control. If people speculate on the price of pepper and go into it as gambling, they may "over-play their hand" [*kayiliruppu*]. … Here there are a few people who constructed a new house or married off a daughter on the expectation [*pratīkṣa*] of this and next year's harvest. Recently the Panchayat [elected local administration] conducted a survey on debt. I was the only one without debt. I like hard work and I am satisfied. I don't need to show anything to my neighbors by getting a loan.

It is farmers like Mathew—owners of land, hardworking, proud, and alive—who the agrarian officer was referring to when he spoke of the "real farmers" who didn't commit suicide. Both men, the development trustee and the self-proclaimed modest and hard-working farmer, seem to agree that the suicides spoke primarily of the moral failure of individual cultivators, who were ultimately responsible for their own suicides. In this discourse of "blaming the victims," which was widespread among better-of farmers and urban middle classes, among the recurring themes were the laziness of farmers, their bad management, conspicuous consumption, inflated dowry, alcoholism and an irrational obsession with increasing one's status through the construction of new houses.

Other moral explanations of suicide locate responsibility more at the collective level. Wayanad's agriculturalists today find themselves at a crossroads. For over 50 years, the district, along with other areas of the Malabar region, had been the promised land of Syrian Christian modernity in Kerala (Varghese 2006), a landscape that was transformed within one generation from a forested, malaria-infested hinterland of the colonial Madras Presidency into a hub for the production of cash crops, which involved the foundation of new Christian institutions and resulted in the formation of a modern rural middle class with a prosperity that far exceeded that of farmers in parts of lowland Kerala (Jacob 2006; Varghese 2006). Now, however, many migrant settlers are pessimistic about the future of agriculture and reports of suicides are seen as symptomatic of a general crisis in small-holder cash cropping. Landholdings may have been adequate at the time of the 1960s land reform by successive Left governments, which granted land rights of roughly 14 acres to many tenant farmers across Kerala, including many of Wayanad's settlers (Mannathukkaren 2011; Radakrishnan 1989). Many of these small holdings now yield too little to be able to sub-divide them into viable plots among one's children, which in turn prompts the younger generation to abandon agriculture in favor of urban employment or higher education in the neighboring states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The history of internal migration to Wayanad, which was characterized by rapacious land grabs at the forest frontier, now returns with a vengeance: large forest mammals living in small, fragmented, and overpopulated wildlife sanctuaries increasingly raid the fields of pioneer farmers, often making agriculture impossible (Münster and Münster 2012b). More critically, fungal diseases and excessive chemical input have left many fields unfit for profitable farming.

Varghese, a prominent member of Pulpally's Syro Malabar Church, interpreted farmers' suicide with recourse to a moral narrative about the boom and crash of settler agriculture:

> I will tell you the real story of farmers' suicides in Wayanad. In the years of the pepper boom, the use of chemicals was high in Pulpally, because we were in a frenzy about production. Farmers came to town with a jeep full of pepper and took one jeep full of chemicals back. They bought whatever was available in the market and applied it without thinking. … After 1995 everybody was constructing new houses. A competition for higher, better houses was going on. But the majority could not finish their constructions. They lost all [their] pepper. The houses stand now like skeletons without door or floor in the properties. The rich or the middle class committed suicide. They did a lot of useless works, like spending three *lakh* [300,000 INR] on painting. They were continuing even though they could not afford it.

It seems probable that reports of farmers' suicides, although doubted by many, appealed to the imagination of cultivators in Wayanad because their "right to continue being agriculturalists" (Edelman 2005) was at stake. Behind Varghese's laconic summation that "they lost all [their] pepper" are biographies of shattered aspirations and sudden economic decline. I cannot recall how many times I heard sentences like "I don't see any future here" or "agriculture is over in Wayanad." It took me a while to learn to observe the signs of agrarian doom. After all, Wayanad is one of the most popular destinations for tourists from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala (Münster and Münster 2012a). What visitors don't see, however, is that the trees in the fields were planted to support pepper vines that have since disappeared, that coffee plantations are neglected, that farmers apply the weedicide Roundup for lack of laborers, and that the conversion of wet rice paddies into fields for fast growing cash crops (e.g. banana) is irreversible and hence destined to destroy the fertility of the land.

Vayal vāḻa, the cultivation of banana (*vāḻa*) in wet-rice fields (*vayal*) neatly exemplifies the association between suicide and ecological doom (see Figure 6.1). Surendran Chetti, a *Wayanad Chetti* (or *Chetty*, one of the old cultivating castes in the region), told me his views on farmers' suicides. He personally knew of only one suicide that had happened in his neighborhood, but in this particular case, according to Surendran, the suicide had stemmed from an argument between the deceased and his wife. Nevertheless, he had a theory of farmers' suicides that invoked the difference between Chettis and Nayars—"the real farmers of Wayanad" and the Christian migrants who were after "easy income." His thesis proceeded as follows:

> These farmers are in crisis because they spent all their money in periods of decline; then they were hit by price falls and ended up with debts. To regain their lost money, they changed their cultivation and shifted from paddy to banana. But

Figure 6.1 Agrarian landscape in Wayanad, showing banana plantation in wet-rice field. Photograph by D. Münster, 2013

> bananas need a dry soil, so they drained the *vayal.* But the *vayal* conserves the water; it holds it for at least ninety days. For two or three years they were making money and a real race set in. Then the yield went down. So they started using chemicals excessively; they call it "medicine" [*marunnu*]. The use of pesticide exploded since the late 1980s. Now they suffer from drought, winds destroy the plantations, the fields are useless and fallow now.

In reference to the ongoing overuse of agro-chemicals, it was repeatedly pointed out to me that it was no coincidence that the primary means of committing suicide in Wayanad was by consuming Feuredan, one of the most toxic systemic insecticides available in India, which was found in most agrarian households in Wayanad due to its use in banana cultivation. Another Chetti farmer added that "the worst [cultivators] are those who lease the land." The practice of leasing out paddies has become popular with the declining profits from rice cultivation, due to which many paddies were left fallow. The problems with banana conversion [*vayal vāḻa*] were compounded when cultivators without prior experience in agriculture began cultivation for quick profit on leased land; in such cases, the shortsighted over-use of chemicals knew literally no limit. Once the fields where chemically destroyed after one or two seasons, cultivators would simply

move on to another field. In local discourse this widespread practice is linked to suicide in two ways: first, the initial conversion of vayal is said to be driven by economic distress and the need for quick cash; and second, banana is a very capital-intensive and high-risk crop that may completely fail and thereby ruin the cultivator. During my interview with local farmers, the poisoned landscape of post-agrarian cash-crop farming was more than once discursively linked to the poisoned bodies of the suicides.

As Surendran Chetti's argument suggests, the moral economy of agriculture in Wayanad is sometimes cast in a communal (in the South Asian sense of caste and religious groups) light—as a critique of the large-scale immigration of Syrian Catholics into the region. A thorough treatment of the role of Syrian Christianity in the agro-environmental history of Wayanad is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say for the moment that doubts about the blessings of Christian modernity and progress (Varghese 2006) are voiced not only by the original Hindu inhabitants of Wayanad but also by Christians themselves. As one Christian teacher put it, "the bible is great book if you want to take other peoples' land." In Pulpally, the Christian frontier region of Wayanad, Suresh, another Wayanad Chetti, offered the following take on the Christian's agriculture:

> The government is promoting chemical fertilizers for cultivation. Christians are making use of every opportunity as soon as possible. They are exploiting [*cūṣaṇaṃ*] the land and are heavily using chemicals [*rāsa*]. We [Chettis] have learned this type of exploitation from the Christians. In the olden days we used cow dung only. But they introduced chemicals and are now compelled to use it continuously. I don't want to speak badly about other communities. The government is the root of all evil. No people can live here. We lost pepper and prices are low. How can we survive if wild animals come?

On this and other occasions, my attempts to speak about suicide brought to the surface morally charged stories about agrarian production, changes in the landscape, and histories of dispossession.

The problem of Christianity re-emerged in inquiries into farmers' suicide in Wayanad conducted by Catholic NGOs, which together with media reports on the subject, contributed to the moral panic about suicide that reached its peak during the 2006 State Assembly elections.

The Shifting Realities of Farmers' Suicides in Wayanad

The agrarian officer's doubts about the scale of farmers' suicides were also widespread in Wayanad. Clear-cut cases of suicide were much less easy to identify than one would expect for a certified "suicide-prone district." It is probably fair to say that the great majority of people in Wayanad had no firsthand experience of suicide among their neighbors or friends. However, they were made aware of the

issue by the extensive and often scandalizing media coverage of this India-wide phenomenon since the late 1990s (Mohanty 2005).

From around 2004 onward, suicides in rural Kerala were integrated into this national narrative and interpreted as a direct consequence of globalization and liberalization. Reports of farmers' suicides in Wayanad fell on fertile ground, with the rural economy mired in crisis following the crash in global cash crop prices in 1999 and the appearance of new diseases that devastated production of pepper and vanilla, two essential commodities. The recession in this agrarian district manifested itself at the individual level in a proliferation of household debt to both institutional and private lenders. Against a backdrop of unprecedented agitations by farmers' groups, who were enraged by debts, precarious livelihoods and the seizure of properties by banks, against the state and central governments the campaigning for the State Assembly election in 2006 unfolded. "Agrarian crisis" (*kārṣika pratisandhi*) and "farmers' suicide" (*karṣaka ātmahatya*) became centerpieces in the Left Democratic Front's (LDF) historic victory in all three constituencies of Wayanad, until then a stronghold of the right-wing Congress-led coalition (UDF). In 2006 Wayanad was also included in the central government's list of "suicide-prone districts" (see Münster 2012). Among the tangible consequences of this inclusion was Wayanad's selection as a pilot district for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, an ambitious multi-billion rupee program that guarantees every worker in India 100 days of employment at the minimum wage, with equal pay for men and women. In addition to this, Wayanad enjoyed allocations of central funds under the so-called Vidharbha package, relief interventions named after a notorious suicide region in Maharashtra.

It was not only the left-wing political parties and farmers' movements that were quick to draw connections between Wayanad's suicides and the nationwide epidemic; local NGOs also seized upon this issue. Many of these organizations have their origin in charity and social programs developed by the Syrian Christian churches. A case in point is Shreyas, the social service NGO of the Malankara Catholic Diocese of Bathery, which published the first report on "increasing suicides in Wayanad" (Shreyas 2007). Based on a survey of 316 families directly affected by suicide, the study identified a clear link (mentioned by 38.6 percent of respondents) between agrarian crisis and suicide.[11] This study drew nationwide attention and was arguably the spur for Caritas India and Caritas Australia to launch in 2007 the Safe Farmers Campaign (SFC), a much larger research-cum-relief project run by a consortium of seven NGOs (including Shreyas) with a budget of millions of dollars.

It was among the lower-level field staff of these NGOs (see Figure 6.2), who were being sent out to collect data on suicides, that I first heard serious doubts being raised about the survey category of farmers' suicide. These doubts were expressed only in private conversations, as everyone was aware of the funding that

11 The respondents of this survey could choose only one answer and, significantly, the majority answered "not known" (39 percent).

Figure 6.2 NGO workers on their way to visit suicide families in Wayanad. Photograph by D. Münster, 2008

would be lost if the suicide epidemic turned out to have no link to agrarian crisis, or worse still, to not be an epidemic at all. It was clear to the lower-level NGO staff that Caritas was interested in Indian farmers' suicides and that local NGOs had an interest in Wayanad being part of the nationwide crisis, in which, according to K. Nagaraj (2008), more than one hundred thousand farmers had committed suicide. One local observer of the NGO scene offered the following take on the politics of farmers' suicides:

> The first report [(Shreyas 2007)] was really the key thing for fundraising. Approximately four *crore* [40 million] rupees came from Caritas India and Caritas Australia. They wanted more incidences [of farmers' suicides]. They think, "Suicide is our baby, how can anyone claim that they are not agriculture related?" They wanted to make it as agrarian crisis just to get funding for the next year. In 2009 Caritas Australia came, looking for farmers' suicides and agrarian crisis. If the report is another way, the funding will not come. … It's a caucus, a network of NGOs; they play together.

In 2009 the final report by Wayanad's NGOs (Kerala Social Service Forum 2009) came up with the astonishing figure of 1,690 suicides for approximately the same

period in which the first report spoke of 316 suicides. This report wrestles with the problem of the causation and hence categorization of these rural suicides as "farmers' suicides." On the one hand, the report writes of "media hype" and the uncritical adoption of the term "farmers' suicide" (Kerala Social Service Forum 2009). On the other hand, the ambivalence of the report's findings is reflected in the careful wording used to uphold the notion of farmers' suicides despite evidence that only 16 percent of the suicides according to their own study were committed by "farmers" in a narrow sense:

> Wayanad being a zero industrial area and the brutal majority of its inhabitants being agricultural farmers/laborers, anything and everything that pertained to suicides were linked to 'farmer suicide.' Somehow it was an accepted norm of media reporting to present every case of suicide as that of a farmer. However, on a closer analysis of the data generated from the study herein, it was found that only 264 out of 1690 reported cases of suicides belonged to the farmers' category. It means only 16% of the totally reported cases of suicides (1690) come under the classification of 'agriculturists.' … However, in the backdrop of Wayanad, even the employed persons were also farmers in restricted sense. Therefore, though it was not fully correct to present suicides as strictly that of farmers, it was justifiable if those cases were termed as 'farmers' suicides.' (Kerala Social Service Forum 2009: 10)

What the authors of the report argue here is that although "farmers' suicide" has been a focus of media hype and only 16 percent of the suicides were actually committed by farmers, Wayanad is so essentially agrarian (i.e. "zero industrial") that everything in the district is somehow connected to agriculture and all suicides are thus ultimately "farmers' suicides."

The report is also full of moral evaluations of suicide, most of which efface subaltern agency in favor of victimhood. Among these are explanations invoking crisis, despair, stress, and the generally critical state of agriculture. In certain places, however, the report shifts its moral discourse toward responsibility. Tellingly, this shift happens when the Catholic authors of the report talk about their own people, or more specifically, about the "principal reasons for suicide among the elite societies, i.e. the *Ezhavas/Thiyyas*, Roman Catholics and the *Nairs*":

> Unhealthy and reckless competitions among people, consumeristic hubris, greed and avarice, indiscreet alcoholic addiction, outrageous and wasteful expenditure on marriages and life-style etc. have galvanized the communities … leading to accumulated debts, resulting in increased number of suicides. (Kerala Social Service Forum 2009: 7)

Here, the authors reproduce a moral discourse that is very widespread among Syrian Catholics in Wayanad. The report thus illustrates how the moral discourse regarding healthy and unhealthy lifestyles as well as healthy and unhealthy

agrarian practices is largely independent of any evidential link between suicide and farming. Just as the study found that farmers accounted for a meager 16 percent of suicides in the district, most of the general public had had little direct experience of suicide cases. Yet farmers' suicides served time and again to make strong moral points.

My intention is not to expose farmers' suicides as some kind of "hoax," as Ronald Herring (2006) seems to do in his recent attack on the anti-GMO movement in India. To me, it makes sense to take "farmers' suicides" in Wayanad seriously for several reasons. First of all, suicide statistics have constructed suicides as a reality in the region. Farmers' suicides have become a known "fact," something "out there" prior to qualitative and grounded engagements with individual and regional circumstances. These statistics took on a life of their own in the media and election campaigns and forced everyone to react to the possibility of an epidemic of self-inflicted death occurring in their neighborhood (Münster 2012, 2015b). Second, and here I tend to agree with the KSSF report, everything is related to agriculture in Wayanad; the district's economy depends overwhelmingly on smallholder agriculture, which is now in crisis. I would not follow KSSF, however, in locating the etiology of suicides unambiguously in agrarian crisis by simply widening the category of farmer to include everyone in Wayanad. Such a single "cause" of rural suicides is methodologically impossible to establish. Rather, these "farmers' suicides" (whatever their personal and economic complexities) were suicides *of* all farmers of Wayanad: The latter were called upon by the media and the state to discursively react to these suicides and to makes sense of them predominantly in relation to agrarian practices. Wayanad's suicides were thus farmers' suicides in the sense that one of their major effects was to initiate among all farmers in the district a critical moment of self-reflection about the past, present, and future of agriculture.

Conclusion: Agency and Responsibility

As should by now be apparent, the testimony of farmers, neighbors of suicides, officials, priests, NGO workers, and other agrarian stakeholders shed light less on self-inflicted death than on agrarian production. With most of my interlocutors, I wanted to talk about suicide but ended up speaking about the moral economy of agriculture. Whether suicides were exaggerated, falsely associated with the nationwide phenomenon of farmers' suicides, or committed by persons with only a tenuous dependence on agriculture is not really relevant in this context. Farmers' suicides—real or imagined, contested or defended, denied or enumerated—meaningfully illustrate a crisis in the moral economy of agriculture that is manifest in the disrupted metabolic relationship between humans and the environment. In light of the well-argued critique of the notion of "peasantry" (Kearney 1996) and particularly of peasants as a "class" (Wolf 2001: 252), I have sought to speak of the moral economy of agriculture instead of the "moral

economy of the peasant." This entails a shift in focus from class to production. The local discourses of the existential crisis afflicting agrarian production, of which suicides are indicators, go beyond a sectorial decline of rural production and include, I contend, a history of deteriorating human-environmental relations. The seriousness and sadness of suicide has been shown to be an important catalyst for many people to speak of the moral crisis of farmers who were attributed by many of my interlocutors with responsibility for the ecological costs of chemicalized mono-cropping and for turning agriculture into a business. I have not discussed any particular cases of suicide in this chapter, but rather have traced the emergence of a public debate about suicide, agency, and farming. What caused farmers' suicide was very much a public question in Wayanad, debated by specialists (within the government as well as the NGO sector) as well as by almost everyone else. Whomever I asked, they were glad to contribute their opinions. These local interpretations are fruitful objects of ethnographic inquiry in themselves and may complement the pursuit of "structural causes" either through case studies or statistical analyses of correlations between suicide rates and economic factors. The existential urgency that is attributed to most instances of self-inflicted death makes conversations about rural suicides ideal ethnographic entry points for an investigation of agrarian matters of concern.

I have discussed three ways of conceptualizing agency in both popular and academic treatments of farmers' suicides. Victimhood is the agency attributed to suicides in the largely mainstream social scientific and activist literature. A variant of this is the interpretation of suicide in terms of voice, message, or resistance. In Wayanad, I have argued, the predominant way of speaking about agency in suicide is in terms of responsibility. The shared responsibility of all settler farmers for the state of agriculture makes these debates more than cheap maneuvers toward blaming the victims. When the Christian settlers of Wayanad reflect on their agrarian legacy they have to account for both poisoned landscapes and poisoned selves. Suicide has become in this context a vehicle for cultural critique. In other words, farmers think about suicide in the same way that they think about themselves. Or rather, they talk about suicide in the same way they think about themselves.

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Chapter 7
Dying to Live in Palestine: Steadfastness, Pollution and Embodied Space

Deen Sharp and Natalia Linos

> What crime did I commit to make you destroy me?
> I will never cease embracing you.
> And I will never release you.
>
> Mahmoud Darwish, "He Embraces His Murderer," 1986, 17,

A human dying to kill horrifies. The perceived and conceived—the mental and emotional—impacts of suicide attacks, in particular on the Western imagination, are far greater than other forms of violence. The deliberate utilization of one's own life as a tool of destruction is viewed by many as a specifically abhorrent form of violence: an "inhuman aberration that cannot—or must not—be understood," as described by Jacqueline Rose (2004: 21). Indeed, even writing on suicide violence necessitates, as we have done in this chapter, clear caveats and disclaimers that thinking and theorizing on forms of mechanical violence, such as drone strikes or cluster bombs, simply do not require. But why does the destruction of buildings, flesh, bones and soil caused by a weapon, which was formally a body, produce more horror than a weapon that was a machine?

In this chapter we outline how a ballistic body has a greater social impact than a ballistic missile, as bodies—and the risk of mixing blood and body parts—carry potent political, social, and spatial messages that are distinct. As Judith Butler argues: "The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well" (2006: 26). We place the occupied body at the center of this chapter because of this duality—simultaneously vulnerable to violence and a potential agent of violence. The transformation of a body into a weapon, and the literal dismemberment beyond recognition, could render the body forgotten, eradicated and with it the agency it may or may not have had. The body that is transformed into a weapon, however, does not lose its bodily existence, even if it loses its form.

This is a theoretical piece that tries to problematize the role of the occupied body as a corporeal entity and its relationship with the physical space in which it is situated as both central to this "act." And we engage with the occupied body in its multiple forms focusing at times on the physical body, where blood, flesh and bones

are tangible but can carry symbolic meaning, and at other times on the political and cultural body, the "invariably public dimension" that Butler underscores (2006: 26).

Through tracing the occupied body at an extreme moment of violence, we argue that suicide attacks within the Palestinian-Israeli context can be understood beyond the binaries of an act of futile self-destruction or a heroic act of resistance. We view them as an act located in the space in-between resistance and submission. Moreover, this chapter contributes to theoretical understandings of embodied space and pollution. Specifically, we detail the ability of the body to pollute, symbolically and materially, and to communicate beyond its integral unit. We argue that the potency of suicide attacks, with no obvious military target, can be better understood through an interrogation of blood and body parts and how they intersect with space and culture.

Multiple scientific attempts to frame suicide bombers to a fixed (il)logic (e.g. Bloom 2005; Hoffman 2003; Kramer 1990; Merari 1990; Post 1990; Shay 2004), and to a particular group, ethnicity or religious belief have failed (Gambetta 2005; Reuter 2004; Soibelman 2004). Robert Pape studied all 187 "suicide terrorist attacks" worldwide from 1980–2001 and concluded that, "although only a tiny number of people become suicide terrorists, they come from a broad cross section of lifestyles, and it may be impossible to pick them out in advance" (2003: 2). Scholarly literature on suicide attacks has privileged psychological and security approaches, which often try to render the suicide attacker a non-person, one that is manipulated, and not the political agent of his or her own life, resulting in an explanatory vacuum of this phenomenon. As Rose argues, studies that try to locate what kind of people suicide bombers are will not find an answer: "Suicide bombers are not a species" (2004: 23). Such analytical limitations highlight the need for further methods of inquiry and we hope that this theoretically driven piece will encourage further debate, as well as deeper ethnographic research.

Anthropologists and geographers (e.g. Abufarha 2009; Assad 2007; Dabbagh 2010; Enns 2004; Hage 2003; Isin and Finn 2007; Long 2006) have engaged with suicide attacks and the forms of violence that this phenomenon creates. Yet, the simultaneous cultural, political and spatial meanings of suicide attacks have been understudied. The work of geographer Joanne Long (2006) is an important exception and is central to this exploration of suicide violence and agency. Long builds upon Julia Kristeva's theory of "abjection," that deals with the boundary between the inside and outside of the body and the anxieties which transgressions of that boundary produce (2006: 111), to examine the representation of Palestinian women by Israeli national security at extreme moments of vulnerability (pregnancy) and violence (when women carry out suicide attacks). Importantly, Long argues that the suicide bomber annihilates the border separating the inside from the outside, and the self from the other: "The dead and the survivors intermingle. Israeli merged with Palestinian" (2006: 120). Long, however, leaves many questions unanswered and while she gestures towards spaces that are created through suicide violence that go beyond the "binaristic Self/Other, sovereign/sacred, Israel/Palestine distinctions" (2006: 125),

these new possible spaces are not explored in detail. In this chapter we build on and extend Long's insights, focusing on how the body, body parts and fluids communicate beyond the living integral unit of the body to gain social and spatial significance, and how this creates particular links to comprehensions between agency and suicide violence.

We believe that this chapter has value in that it critically engages with different disciplines—namely anthropology, geography, public health and political science—generating original, if at times provocative, hypotheses based on textual analysis rather than formal fieldwork. Our work is situated in recent debates in anthropology on the definition of the field, the role of ethnography, and the need for more interdisciplinary work to adequately address contemporary global and trans-boundary issues, from environmental devastation, to violence, and hunger (Baba and Hill 2006: 197). We do not seek to engage with moral debates on the use of suicide violence, and recognize that anthropologists and geographers trying to find a reason or rationale behind suicide attacks, are likely to be accused of taking an apologist stance. As Hage notes, "There is a clear political risk in trying to explain suicide bombings" (2003: 67). Rather we use anthropology and geography to explore the potential multiple meanings and reactions of such violence at the individual and community level within both Palestinian and Israeli society. To understand how the body intersects with politics the next section examines the relevance of the concepts of biopower and necropower in exploring the social, material and symbolic importance of the body in suicide attacks.

Locating Suicide Violence: Neither Here nor There

Michel Foucault introduced the idea of biopower to articulate the dispositifs (or mechanisms) of power focused on life and the individual body. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1,* he traces the historical transformation of the power of the sovereign during the seventeenth century, from a power over death to a power over and "calculated management" of life (1978: 136–8). In elaborating this shift Foucault articulates two interrelated poles of development. The first of these poles is the development of the body as a machine creating an anatomo-politics of the human body. The second, formed later, was the species body, the body as the basis for the biological processes of births and mortality, the level of health and life expectancy (Foucault 1978: 139). The supervision and regulation of the species body is carried out through biopolitics. By the nineteenth century these two poles were deemed by Foucault to have combined to form the great technologies of power (Rabinow and Rose 2006: 196).

The body was understood by Foucault to be central to the concept of biopower and captive to the political field, shaped through power relations, marked by occupation and politics, and molded by a political economy. Through the Foucauldian lens of biopolitics and biopower, suicide is the ultimate transgression—it is a subversive act of agency. The suicide attacker has negated

the sovereign's biopolitical power. In our case, the Israeli sovereign is no longer able to supervise, shape or regulate the Palestinian subject; indeed, the power over life is inverted in a suicide attack. The power of death to subvert sovereign rule was fully articulated by Achille Mbembe (2003) through the concepts of necropolitics and necropower, or the politics and power of death. Necropolitics supplements the ideas of biopower and biopolitics, and in doing so Mbembe reconfigures contemporary understandings of the politics and power of death.

Mbembe argues that those that use their very existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations, far from being products of insanity, are "the nomos of the political space in which we still live" (2003: 14). Sovereignty, Mbembe claims, is the power to define who maters and who does not, and who is disposed of and who is not; the necropower of a suicide attack is in its resistance to a sovereign power and its inversion of it, death is now a transgression (2003: 27–38). In a suicide attack Mbembe argues resistance and self-destruction are synonymous, "The body duplicates itself and, in death, literally and metaphorically escapes the state of siege and occupation" (2003: 37). Death in Mbembe's formulation is no longer the opposite of life.

Abdul JanMohamed (2005) in his examination of the multiple lynchings of African Americans and Paul Gilroy's (1993) citation of the practice of individual and mass suicides by slaves cornered by slave catchers contribute to Mbembe's formulation of death as freedom. Notably Gilroy argues that the positive preference for death by the slave rather than continued servitude articulates a principle of negativity. This is opposed to the formal logic and rational calculation characteristic of modern western thinking and expressed in the Hegelian slave's preference for bondage rather than death (1993: 68). Death is now framed as simultaneously the space where power, freedom and negation intersect: death is formulated as agentic. Mbembe speaks directly to our context in Palestine-Israel by arguing that Palestinian necropolitics can be used to defeat a negative Israeli biopolitical mechanism of control: "For death is precisely that from and over which I have power. But it is also that space where freedom and negation operate" (2003: 39).

Understanding suicide attacks through the prism of necropolitics renders visible the potential agency within the act of a suicide attack: an act of dying to display life in Palestine. The Palestinian doctor Eyad el-Sarrag explains the complexity of the relationship between freedom and death: "Desperation is a very powerful force—it's not only negative. It propels people to action or solutions that previously would have been unthinkable" (citied in Enns 2004: no pagination). It is critical to comprehend here that desperation, the force of the occupation, does not result in submission to the dominant power but to new forms of agency. These new forms of agency, however, cannot be simply understood as resistance. Diego Gambetta has remarked that Palestinian suicide attacks are, "chillingly desolate affairs", with "no obvious intended positive effect for the organizers" (2005: 267). The apparent lack of strategic military utility in suicide attacks within the Palestinian-Israeli context also stresses the extent to which such acts are performative. Hage argues that "The suicide bombers become a sign that

Palestinians have not been broken. They are a sign of life … Violence here has no function other than to symbolize the survival of a Palestinian will" (2003: 72).

Can then a suicide bomber be viewed as achieving freedom? It would appear that we have swung from Foucault's formulation, in which biopolitics frames the body as passive to domination, to Mbembe in which the body can be used as a tool of resistance through its self-destruction: from the tragic martyr to the heroic martyr. Joanne Long stresses the agency of female suicide bombers noting that women are not "transformed" into a suicide bomber but "it is a woman's *decision* to become a 'suicide bomber'" (2006: 122). But Long cautions against thinking of such violence as "resistance" and rejects Kristeva's assertion of the emancipatory potential of suicide violence (2006: 122). Following Diane Enns (2004), Long points towards the in-betweenness of suicide violence, with resistance on one hand and submission on the other. Both Long and Enns, however, fail to articulate or identify what this space in-between submission and resistance could be. The argument we forward is that suicide attacks could be analytically understood as being similar to *sumud*—an act of steadfastness; an idea that situates itself in-between the narratives of violent resistance and submission.

The concept of *sumud* arose from a Palestinian intellectual scene in the 1970s caught within the dialectic of oppression and resistance. Critical, to the meaning of *sumud* is to reclaim Palestinian dignity and perseverance in the face of the occupation. *Sumud* resists the occupation through patience and perseverance. Laleh Khalili outlines that: "A narrative of *sumud* recognizes and valorizes the teller's (and by extension the nation's) agency, ability, and capacity in dire circumstances, but it differs from the heroic narrative in that it does not aspire to super-human audacity, and consciously values daily survival rather than glorious battle" (2007: 101). The goal of *sumud*, with regard to spatial practices, is: "to stay put, to cling to our homes and land by all means available" (Shehadeh cited in Khalili 2007: 99).

Some could argue an analysis of suicide attacks through the concept of *sumud* is problematic from a temporal and normative perspective. Ostensibly *sumud* is understood to be about an ongoing and long-term struggle to remain on one's land, and is the opposite of a suicide attack, which lasts only seconds. A suicide attack has been comprehended normatively as a letting go, and giving up—an absence of agency. We argue that this is not the case, and that anthropological and geographical concepts of the body and space—in particular embodied space and pollution—render visible the agency and steadfastness, within suicide attacks, in the Palestinian context.

Indeed, although *sumud* has often been described as a peaceful form of resistance, violence and the embodiment of violence can be linked to attempts by Palestinians to reclaim dignity and perseverance in the face of the occupation. For instance, Julie Peteet's fieldwork with Palestinian male youth is illustrative of how practices associated with *sumud* have been linked to forms of violence. Peteet argues that Israeli beating and detentions are reframed as "rites of passage," and what we understand to be a form of steadfastness, of manhood among Palestinian

male youth (1994: 32). She describes the Palestinian battered body, with its bruises and broken limbs as symbols of Palestinian powerlessness but, through Palestinian presentations of the broken and marked body, simultaneously of Palestinian determination to resist and struggle against such violence: "A representation [the broken and marked Palestinian body] created with the intent of humiliating has been reversed into one of honor, manhood, and moral superiority" (Peteet 1994: 38). The body becomes both a site of domination and resistance, and a metonym for the Palestinian struggle. An extension of this analysis is that suicide attacks may be reframed analogously as "rites of passage," or more specifically *sumud*, for the collective social body to oppose structural violence in everyday life, but in a manner that is also confined by this structural violence.

In locating the agency of suicide attacks through the concept of *sumud*, suicide attacks are not understood, as Mbembe argues, as the irrevocable intertwining of freedom and death or, as Foucault asserts, as the occupier achieving unchallenged domination of the occupied. The idea of *sumud* is one that gives agency to those subject to a system of control, discipline and violence by an occupying power, and simultaneously recognizes how the occupier can shape the agency of the occupied. Both Mbembe and Foucault overlook the fact that the space of negation is controlled not only by the negator but also the occupier. In the next section we attempt to lift the obfuscating narratives embedded in the response to suicide attacks of heroic martyrdom, on the one hand, and the embodiment of evil, on the other, and illuminate how suicide attacks produce a "presence of absence" (Darwish 2011 [2006]) through a discussion of the material and symbolic importance of the body, body parts and fluids, and its intersection with space. In building on the work of Long, we shift theoretical lenses principally from Julia Kristeva's theory of "abjection" to Mary Douglas' (1966) theory of "pollution."

Pollution and Horror

Mary Douglas introduced the concept of pollution in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* to explain how social order is maintained: "Where there is dirt there is system" (1966: 36). Douglas explored dirt as a cultural construct, rather than a universalistic principal, and how dirt, or pollution, transgresses the social order and as a result becomes subject to punishment or ritual purification. As Douglas notes, "Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death" (1966: 6). Subsequently, that which is given the status of dirt establishes boundaries and safeguards specific social structures. Douglas stresses, however, that only a semblance of social order is created through ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions. This only exaggerates distinctions between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against. Dirt and pollution can be mobilized, therefore, to disrupt

certain orders and systems: "We must, therefore, ask how dirt, which is normally destructive, sometimes becomes creative" (1966: 160).

Anthropologists have examined the role of bodily pollution as a tool in political protest in various contexts (e.g. Aretxaga 2003; Das 2007; Feldman 1991). From 1978 to 1981, Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) prisoners engaged in a Dirty Protest that involved defecating inside their cells, and smearing their feces on the walls. For women, this protest also involved menstrual blood. Commentators of this protest, including the media, international organizations, and government officials highlighted the incomprehensible and self-inflicted nature of this act (Aretxaga 2003). Alan Feldman (1991) and Begonal Aretxaga (2003) examined the power of pollution in providing IRA prisoners an opportunity to reclaim the prison space and undermine or contest the control that prison guards previously had over that space and over their bodies. Although Feldman considers excreta as "detached weapons" (1991: 81), Aretxaga highlights that "far from being a detached weapon, the Dirty Protest entailed a deep personal involvement, a process that was tremendously painful psychologically and physically" (2003: 247).

Veena Das (2007) also draws on the concept of polluting one's body and environment as a tool for political protest in her descriptions of the ethnic violence that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. Das describes how women caught up in the ethnic conflict defiantly refused to return to "normality" and used their own filth as a sign of both mourning and protest (2007: 195). Utilizing their body to *show* injustice, women were able to disrupt the masculinized politics of the conflict through a "feminine" activity—mourning—and augment their political voice and agency. Das notes: "The gendered division of labor in the work of mourning through which private grief and public lamentations were conjoined opened up a space for political action" (2007: 193).

Recognizing the scholarship on the role of bodily pollution in political protest and Douglas' legacy, we build on more recent anthropological conceptions of pollution and in particular on literature from urban studies. In these studies a "hybridity" of pollution is outlined that includes both material aspects and social or imaginary components (Dürr and Jaffe 2010). This concept of hybridity includes both the pollution of the social body (and ethnic identity), as well as the pollution of the built environment (literal debris and physical materials). Central to the idea is that there is a socio-cultural association between physical, material pollution and certain groups of people: "Concepts of pollution in cities are apparent in struggles over space and place, between groups differentiated on the basis of class, ethnicity or religion" (Dürr and Jaffe 2010: 5).

Indeed, the Israeli architect and scholar Eyal Weizman (2007) highlights how Jewish neighborhoods and settlements that have been built without permits and populated before sewage systems have been installed, pollute Palestinian space and reinforce the order of occupation. The topography of the West Bank, Weizman notes, guarantees that all raw sewage from hilltop settlements will pass down a valley next to a Palestinian town or village:

> The accumulated dirt within the walled-off Palestinian area confirmed the hygienic phobia of Zionism. Blurring the literal with the metaphorical, the piles of dirt and sewage affirmed a common national-territorial imagination that sees the presence of Palestinians as a 'defiled' substance within the 'Israeli' landscape … By inducing direct and raw sewage, Israel could go on demanding the further application of its hygienic practices of separation and segregation. (2007: 20)

We argue that the Israeli occupation—where the Palestinian culture, body and built environment intersect—frames the Palestinian as a pollutant on three levels, which are then used to reinforce Israeli rule: (i) "polluted spaces", Palestinian space is regulated, violated and monitored by the Israeli military and in this process Palestinian inhabitation emerges as "unclean"—something noxious to be metaphorically, and literally, swept away, ordered, and sanitized (Graham 2004: 206); (ii) "demographic pollution", the Jewish-Israeli space is threatened by the high rate of birth among the Palestinian population (Kanaaneh 2002: 23–81), in the land and space that these additional bodies occupy; and (iii) "pollution of intercourse" (Wacquant 2003: 321), with the bodies of an outcast—racially, ethnically, or religiously inferior—group which are seen as cancerous and unclean that literally and figuratively threaten the Israeli (social) body.

The Palestinian scholar Sari Hanafi (2004) argues that central to the Israeli colonial project is an attack on space, "spacio-cide" as he coins it. Hanafi notes that this is a process where the land is targeted "for the purpose of rendering inevitable the 'voluntary' transfer of the Palestinian population primarily by targeting the space on which the Palestinian people live" (Hanafi 2004: no pagination). If Palestinian space is under the perpetual threat of being "cleaned," what tools do the Palestinians have to push back against such spacio-cide?

We propose that by conducting suicide attacks in public spaces Palestinians may be employing the polluting power of their bodies in an attempt to disrupt the space of occupation. We locate this suicide violence not as an act as resistance or submission but in-between, and therefore a form of steadfastness (*sumud*). To make such a claim, however, we turn to the idea articulated by Setha Low (2003) of embodied space(s). As Low notes, the work of Mary Douglas, as well as Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu, and their concern over body spaces are not focused on the body per se but rather are, "… more concerned with the body as a metaphor for social and cultural conceptualization than with the organism itself, and the effect of cultural influences on it and its operations" (2003: 12). Embodied space emphasizes the fundamental role of the *human body* in the definition and creation of space, the body is framed as part of a spatial and cultural analysis: "The space occupied by the body, and the perception and experience of that space, contracts and expands in relationship to a person's emotions and state of mind, sense of self, social relations, and cultural predispositions" (Low 2003: 10). Low notes that "This integrated notion of embodied space addresses the metaphorical and material aspects of the body in space as well as body/space to communicate, transform and contest existing social structures" (2003: 16). In the context of

Palestine-Israel the ability to freely embody space is asymmetrical and we argue that Palestinians utilize both the material and metaphorical power of the body through suicide attacks. In addition, through this interrogation of suicide attacks we extend the theory of embodied space to not only include the integral unit of the body but also its fragments: bodily fluids and both live and dead body parts.

Without having conducted fieldwork we draw on ethnographic work from Israel on blood donations, as well as epidemiological studies on victims of suicide bombings and media accounts of organ donations. Through a hybrid concept of pollution, we argue, during an attack both the social body and the built environment are polluted by blood, bones and organs. This we suggest, is particularly disturbing, in the context of a racialized and spatialized conflict.

Blood

Blood has a fundamental role in the definition and creation of space and presence. This ability of blood to define and create an embodied space enables, we argue, the ballistic body to cause more horror than a ballistic missile. The potency of blood and bodily pollution and its use, is also highlighted by its non-use. Suicide attacks in the Israel-Palestine context have not occurred within communities. There has never been a recorded Palestinian-on-Palestinian suicide attack, to our knowledge, despite the large amount of planned and coordinated intra-Palestinian violence and killing.

Michel Foucault in noting the shift to biopolitics was tracing a move from the "symbolics of blood" to an "analytics of sexuality." Foucault notes that this shift was not a clean break from one mode of power to another but occurred with "overlappings, interactions, and echoes" between the two (1978: 149). Foucault stresses that the two centuries of preoccupation with blood would haunt the administration of sexuality most notably with the rise of racism in the mid-nineteenth century. Anne Stoler, building on Foucault's argument, notes:

> Science and medicine may have fueled the re-emergence of the beliefs in blood, but so did nationalist discourse in which a folk theory of contamination based on cultural contagions, not biological taintings, distinguished true members of the body politic from those who were not. … They were disseminated through an imperial logic in which cultural hybridities were seen as subversive and subversion was contagious. (1995: 52)

Famously Hanna Ardent broke away from the Zionist movement because of Herzl's brand of Jewish nationalism that she argued mimicked European nation-building practices of anti-Semitic governments because it insisted on a politics of "blood and soil," a racially homogenous population that renders minorities a problem (O'Brien 2007: 99).

In this section we highlight both the material and symbolic importance of blood and its ability to pollute through examining the 1996 "Blood Affair," the

false rumors of an HIV positive suicide bomber and the treatment of the blood of "martyrs." Palestinians through the utilization of bodily pollution, and specifically the polluting power of their blood, can disrupt Israeli plans of belonging and the politics of "blood and soil" both symbolically and materially.

In 1996, an investigative journalist uncovered that Magen David Adom, Red Star of David, the equivalent of the Red Cross/Crescent, routinely discarded blood donations by Ethiopian-Israelis. This was done, it was later explained by authorities, to prevent the contamination of the blood supply, including by HIV, due to the high rates of infectious disease among Ethiopian immigrants (Seeman 1999: 159). The literal discarding of Ethiopian-Jewish blood was understood by the Ethiopian-Jewish community as a rejection of their community within Israel and an act to remove them from the embodied space of the nation.

This incident became known as *Parashat ha-Dam* (The Blood Affair) as the discovery led to protests by the Ethiopian-Israeli community who protested that this decision to reject Ethiopian-Israeli blood donations was motivated by racial discrimination. "Thousands of Ethiopian Jews clashed with riot policemen outside the Prime Minister's office," *New York Times* reporter Schmemann (1996: no pagination) described. Among the banners in the protests one stated: "Our blood is as red as yours and we are just as Jewish as you are" (Schmemann 1996: no pagination). Don Seeman's (1999) ethnographic work suggests that the violent clashes with the police that followed were the result of a more fundamental question on the purity of the Israeli social body and the ability, or rather inability, of Ethiopian Jews to claim membership to the state of Israel. The protest by Ethiopian-Jews resisted the rejection and subsequent order that, to them, classified their blood as expendable. A young Ethiopian Jew, Ziva Tedela, was quoted in the *New York Times* explaining: "When they tell me that since 1984 they've been spilling the blood, it feels like the army means nothing, that I'll never be part of Israel, because my color is black and my blood is contaminated. It really hurts" (Schmemann 1996: no pagination).

Protestors carried placards in both English and Hebrew with messages including: "One People, One Blood" (Seeman 1999: 163). Ethiopian-Israelis complained that they were being treated like Palestinians, presumably deemed an excluded people, of divergent blood, and whose blood could be acceptably expelled from the Israeli order and embodied space. Don Seeman notes that: "One of the most popular slogans chanted at the demonstration was *lo nitan dameinu hefkar*, 'We will not allow our blood to go ownerless (or to be abandoned)'" (1999: 164). This slogan, Seeman details, has several levels of meaning, including that Ethiopian-Israelis would "no longer tolerate being treated as if they were less than full and capable owners of their bodies" (1999: 164), and by extension re-claiming agency over their blood and body parts. Further, Seeman highlights how Ethiopian-Israelis were cognizant that the notion of "ownerless" blood is a "highly charged and over determined metaphor in Israel … often deployed in nationalist rhetoric as evidence for the overwhelming moral imperative to establish and defend a majority Jewish nation-state" (Seeman 1999: 164). The concept of "ownerless" blood resonates with the ideas articulated

through embodied space and how both the material and metaphorical aspects of the body can communicate, transform and contest existing social spatial structures.

Recognizing that the fear of contaminated or impure blood is heightened in an existing ethnically charged environment, suicide bombers, we consider, may be employing the "polluting" power of their bodies. Jacqueline Rose suggests that the revulsion associated with suicide violence in Israel, may stem from the "unbearable intimacy shared in the final moments by the suicide bomber and her or his victims" (2004: 22) and we believe that this symbolic polluting of the dead, through the mixing of blood, may explain the horror. However there is also a literal mixing of blood that may explain some of the terror, especially for survivors. In 2002, unfounded rumors spread, that a 17-year-old Palestinian suicide bomber who blew himself near an Israeli border police patrol was HIV positive. Although the spokesman from Israel's Health Ministry said that the blood tested negative the spark of this "new" biological warfare was ignited (Jacobsen, 2002).

Epidemiologic studies, mostly from Israel, have examined the potential for "human shrapnel" to carry infectious disease from a suicide bomber to the victim, specifically through pieces of bone that penetrate the skin of a victim during an attack. Eshkol and Katz looking at over 90 cases of victims found that although, "samples of bone from one suicide bomber tested positive for hepatitis B virus. None of the patients developed clinical signs of hepatitis B, human immunodeficiency virus or other severe infections during follow-up" (2005: 271). Yet, in their conclusion, the authors note: "The penetration of biologic material may transmit severe incurable infectious disease" (2005: 273). The discrepancy between the finding and conclusion suggests that the fear of contamination may be disproportionate to the risk, especially in relation to HIV given the low prevalence rates in the region, and may rather reflect the social anxiety described above. Medical anthropologists in other contexts have explored similar fears of disease. For example, Paul Farmer, in *AIDS and Accusation*, shows how the equation "Haitian = AIDS carrier" or Haitians as the "AIDS vectors" (2006: 212) emerged, and how the narrative that AIDS had come to the US from Haiti resonated in an already racially and ethnically tense environment. The framing of suicide bombers as potential vectors of disease dehumanizes suicide bombers and erases their political agency.

The potency for blood to become a socio-political tool is also articulated by the Palestinian's treatment of "martyrs" blood. Blood here is not viewed as a pollutant but represents purity. Laleh Khalili notes in her book *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine* that upon martyrdom the body is considered "purified" and that the blood of the martyr is not polluting. Normative religious codes are broken. The washing of the deceased, an Islamic obligation, is not done in the case of a "martyr," the unwashed body becoming a potent political symbol: "The vulnerability of the human body—emphasized by the abundance of blood—underlines the notion of heroic sacrifice" (Khalili 2007: 126). Importantly, ritual purification is not possible in a suicide attack. Murray argues: "Ritual cleansing of the deceased becomes impossible on two counts: not only are these bodies in pieces, but will be impossible to determine where one body ends and the other begins … blood

has mixed with blood" (2006: 207). Palestinian and Israeli blood mix creating an embodied space that is neither Palestinian nor Israeli but hybrid.

The important symbolism of blood in traditional religious ideas is important to highlight and Mary Douglas notes, in part with reference to blood, that "religions often sacralise the very unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence" (1966: 160). Due to the construction of different socio-cultural frames blood can be understood simultaneously as polluting and pure and is often at the center of both symbolic and material struggles to produce a specific social order. Blood we argue because of this very duality possesses a distinct social power to disrupt a certain order and a potency to produce horror. The duality of the body as aggressor and victim, vulnerable to violence and an agent of violence, is mirrored in the duality of blood as simultaneously polluting and pure. A suicide bomber may use a heroic narrative of martyrdom and purity, while the victims may view it as polluting, and this duality is able to create a reaction of extreme encroachment. Blood therefore is central to the horror produced in the utilization of the body as a weapon and why a human dying to kill horrifies. Blood both materially and symbolically can be used to tie a certain group together and demark a certain space, blood framed as sacred and pure can produce an ordered embodied space. Therefore, blood can also be utilized to disrupt an embodied space imagined as homogenously pure. We argue this could be understood as steadfastness, or *sumud*, it is a clinging on in dire circumstances, in-between resistance and submission, an act that establishes a presence on the land without being able to claim it, a "presence of absence" (Darwish 2006). It is not only blood, however, that is able to extended itself beyond the integral unit of the body and produce horror. Human remains, we argue, are also able to live beyond the body and can be powerful political, social and spatial tools.

On Organs and Body Parts

Drawing on the insights of Alfred Gell (1998: 16), Laura Peers argues that human remains act as social agents, causing events to happen, sparking new forms of behavior and relationships (2009: 84). In anthropological accounts, discussions on the ability of body parts to live beyond the integral unit have often focused on human organs for transplant (e.g. Hamdy 2012; Lock 2002; Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2002). Recent anthropological research, however, has also begun to extend the debate on body parts beyond those that are medically useable. In Serbia, Maja Petrović-Ŝteger argues, human remains played an integral role in establishing continuities between the past and the present, and that these remains formed metonyms for the justification for conflict and negotiations of the post-conflict political order (2009: 47). The symbolic value placed on human remains is also articulated in Customary International Humanitarian Law, where Rule 113 on the treatment of the dead specifies that parties to the conflict must prevent the dead from being despoiled, and that mutilation of dead bodies is prohibited; similar stipulations are also found in many military manuals (Henckaerts and Doswald-Beck 2005: 409–11).

Laura Peers (2009) argues that in her examination of the treatment of dead enemies, in the context of Britain's colonial past, human remains are so wrapped up in social meaning that they not only act as extensions of persons but also as powerful social agents (79). Peers illuminates the importance of indigenous human remains to British colonial rule, the creation of a British identity and how Britain was able to explain the world to itself (2009: 86–8). The bodies and body parts of indigenous peoples played a crucial role in constructing a certain order and embodied space. Claims to bodies of the dead by tribal peoples in North America and the Pacific have been part of broader attempts to lay the colonial past to rest (Peers 2009: 85). Identifying and recovering human remains across different spatial and temporal experiences have been deemed a fundamental part of the healing process for communities during and after conflict. Petrović-Ŝteger explains in the Serbian context that, "The dead body was key in mobilizing this nexus of relations between power, land title and historical entitlement" (2009: 51). Significantly, therefore, embodied space can address not only the material and metaphorical aspects of the integral body but also bodily fluids and (dead and live) body parts.

Organs and body parts have inhabited a prominent place in the Palestinian-Israel conflict. The donation of organs by Palestinians to Israelis, and vice versa, has attracted significant media attention because it is particularly rare (a Palestinian friend once noted that such cross-group organ transplants were illegal) and evokes emotional responses. One of the most prominent examples of the exchange of human organs across Palestinian and Israeli communities is the case of 12-year-old Ahmed Khatib, who was shot in the head by an Israeli soldier. Ahmed's parents decided that they would donate his organs for transplant. Ahmed's heart, lungs, kidneys and liver were donated to Jewish Israelis, Arab Israelis and Bedouin Arabs. While the move was not met with universal support from the Palestinian community, the leader of the al-Aqsa brigade, a coalition of Palestinian nationalist militias, is quoted in the British newspaper *The Guardian* as stating: "This kind of action is a form of resistance. Six Israelis have a part of a Palestinian in them and we don't think those people would come to kill a Palestinian person" (McGreal 2005: no pagination). In framing this act as "resistance," the heart, lungs, kidneys and liver of Ahmed became political tools, and gained symbolic meaning.

In addition to body parts living beyond the body, dead body parts have also attracted significant attention in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of the Lebanese armed political party Hezbollah, on one of his first speeches following the July 2006 war claimed to have the body parts of Israelis, "I am not talking about insignificant bodily remains. I tell the Israelis we have heads, hands, legs of your soldiers. We also have a nearly intact cadaver from the head down to the pelvis" (BBC 2008: no pagination). The possession of Israeli body parts by Hezbollah, and the detailing of specific body parts is, we believe, used to invoke fear on the side of the Israelis and a sense of power amongst the group's own supporters. Indeed, the possession of Israeli body parts by Hezbollah has disturbed the Israeli body politic to such an extent that in July 2008 Israel

exchanged the body parts of its soldiers held by Hezbollah for five living Lebanese (Bar'el, Khoury, Edelman, et al. 2008: no pagination). This deal included the release of Samir Kuntar, who is accused by Israel of brutally murdering an Israeli child and her father. This is not the only exchange of live prisoners for body parts in this context or globally. The most significant organization, however, that has been engaged with blood and (living and dead) body parts is ZAKA. The next section provides a detailed account of this organization to articulate the importance of the Israeli reaction to understanding the polluting power of suicide attacks and also the importance of blood and body parts to producing embodied space.

ZAKA

ZAKA, a Hebrew acronym for the "Identification of Victims of Disaster," is an organization devoted to recovering "each and every body fragment" after a suicide attack and is the only organization authorized by the Israeli police to handle the recovery and identification of body parts (Stadler 2006, 2012). The organization was established in 1995 by ultra-Orthodox Jews (*Haredi*) in direct response to a suicide attack in 1989 when, as noted on their website,[1] "yeshiva student Yehuda Meshi Zahav and his colleagues were startled into reality by a thunderous boom, followed by an eerie silence and scores of bloodcurdling screams … 'It was chilling and horrifying chaos,' recalls Meshi Zahav [the current ZAKA chairman]" (Zaka 2014). ZAKA is significant for the *Haredi* community as this is one of the few civic activities through which this group engages with the secular state. ZAKA responds to suicide attacks with detailed adherence to religious laws and customs by a sect that interprets death, dead bodies and burial in light of religious beliefs relating to purity, pollution and the sacred (Stradler 2012: 223). "*Chesed Shel Emet* (true virtue) refers to the act of honoring the dead. In Judaism, this is considered the highest form of altruism, for the dead have no way of repaying the kindness," ZAKA's website details.

It is of note, as Stadler explains, that according to Jewish tradition the dead must be buried as soon as possible for two reasons: "the first, the notion of preserving the dignity of the deceased (*kvod ha'met*); and the belief that corpses can ritually pollute their environment and render it Halakhically unhabitable" (2012: 220). Paradoxically, in adhering to religious laws as strictly as ZAKA does results in a breaking of these same laws, as different codes confront one and another. A ZAKA volunteer explains to Stadler that violating the Sabaath, for example, through the collection of pieces of human flesh is a source of pride and an exclusive public act of highest devotion. "According to Jewish law, pieces of human flesh contaminate the Land of Israel, and people who are involved with these remains, particularly those who touch them, are immediately obliged to undergo purification rituals and endure onerous fasts," Stadler concludes (2012: 224).

1 ZAKA. 2014. *ZAKA*. [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.zaka.us/. [Accessed 07 December 2014].

The perceived need by Israeli secular society for such an organization as ZAKA, and its exponential growth and involvement of a usually secluded community in a highly public role, articulates the powerful metaphor that blood, organs and splintered bodies have become in this conflict and the desire to "purify" space. Importantly, Stadler's fieldwork on ZAKA underscores this: "Corpses, blood and pieces of human flesh are perceived as contaminating the land of Israel and the people" (2006: 848) and he understands ZAKA to be "quasi-defenders of the social order" through restoring the body's integrity by "collecting and matching body parts, organs and blood" (2012: 225). Stadler does not examine or question, however, why the social order is being disrupted, or the possible agency of the Palestinian suicide bomber and intentional or strategic use of the occupied body, bodily fluids and body parts.

Blood and body parts are particularly powerful as pollutants both materiality and symbolically because of the bio-political technologies of "incessant purification" of the bio-political state (Stoler 1995: 69) and their importance in traditional religious ideas that continue to organize and infuse modern secular life (Alexander 2003; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982; Snyder 2014). The location of fragments of the body can be a loaded political issue and the possession of body parts a tool of political agency. The bodily remains left by a suicide attack in the Israel-Palestine conflict have prompted socio-political action to reestablish authority and order over the social pollutant, to "purify" the "polluted" embodied space. In this chapter we have tried to highlight that the blood and flesh of the suicide bomber do not just "pollute" the enemy body, but also stain the soil and disrupt the purity of the land through the polluting power of death. Following a suicide attack Palestinian and Israeli body, space and culture mix, it is neither a space of control and discipline nor a space of freedom and resistance.

Conclusion

Historically nation-states have been formed as entities that administered the life force of their populations and ideas about national heritage, culture and history were infused with notions of blood and genealogy (Wade 2007: 6). Dürr and Jaffe claim that the nation-state is envisioned "organically" and is prone to, and must be protected against, pollution, in which deportation and genocide—in the most extreme cases—are posed as solutions to cultural pollution (2010: 6–7). Religious and cultural homogeneity is critical to Israeli nation building and schemata of who and what belongs where. Suicide attacks, through their polluting power, we have argued, can be understood as an attempt to disrupt the embodied space of the occupation and it is this power to pollute that produces the horror of a human dying to kill. The Palestinian through utilizing the "polluting" potential ascribed by the Israeli sovereign inverts this power but not without consequences.

In reframing suicide attacks as an act of pollution and similar to *sumud*, we can render visible the temporal, spatial and agentic implications of such an attack.

Palestinian agency cannot be considered free from the occupation even in the utilization of agency against the sovereign power. Instead the resistance of the Palestinian suicide attacks should be understood as simultaneously acting within and on the occupation. In this context a suicide attack is not seen as resistance or submission but *sumud*. As the fictional character Said, in the film *Paradise Now*, states: "The occupation defines the resistance" (Abu-Assad 2006). Throughout *Paradise Now* the use of the body and life as a weapon is debated. Said and Jamal the two protagonists—who both desire to be suicide bombers—assert throughout the film the desire to overcome occupation and fight for equality, justice and freedom in the undertaking of a suicide attack. Said argues in justifying his impending suicide attack: "Our bodies are all we have left to fight with against the never ending occupation." However, Suha—the central female character in the film—claims that suicide attacks facilitate the continuation of the occupation and that such acts are indeed the occupation defining the resistance: "That's no sacrifice. That's revenge. If you kill, there's no difference between victim and occupier."

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Chapter 8
Accumulating Death: Women's Moral Agency and Domestic Economies of Care in South India

Jocelyn Chua

In recent decades, the south Indian state of Kerala has reported among the highest suicide rates in the nation.[1] The suicide rate began rising significantly in the mid-1990s, reaching three times the national average at its peak. In Thiruvananthapuram District, home of Kerala's capital city and where I conducted over three years of fieldwork spanning from 2002 to 2009, the suicide rate has jumped dramatically from 17.2 in 1995 to as high as 41.4 per 100,000 in 2001. In view of such numbers, Kerala has come to be known in the media as India's so-called "suicide capital," a dubious distinction it now shares with neighboring Tamil Nadu.[2]

While well-circulated statistics have represented certain dimensions of suicide in state and media discourse in Kerala, there are important moral textures and social meanings to suicide that cannot be captured by the Durkheimian fact of its prevalence. In the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram, people live alongside suicide as ever-present possibility in ways that elude enumeration and defy the apparent certainty of numbers. In the middle-class neighborhood where I lived, suicide was folded into the intimate spaces and practices of everyday life in diverse forms: forms as overt as threats directed at family members or as ambiguous as fugitive comment, fantasy, and passing joke. It insinuated itself into casual conversation, settled into the cracks of routine living, and took up residence in the home, sometimes without announcing "suicide" in any declarative or clear-cut manner. Yet even then, layered into ordinary life this way, suicide could powerfully alter how people lived with one another.

Consider the story of Kunjamma.[3] Over tea one afternoon, the widowed grandmother in her seventies spoke of her youngest son's piecemeal employment since his return from the Persian Gulf three years before. As Kunjamma ran her thin fingers along the base of her porcelain cup in quiet thought, she told me that after just eight months in Bahrain, her son was "let go" from his job as a hotel doorman. If only she could send him back there, she said. Detailing for me the

1 Portions of this chapter were published in Chua 2014.

2 See www.ksmha.org for more government statistics. See also Halliburton 1998.

3 The names of all informants have been altered to preserve anonymity.

costs to arrange once again her son's employment, visa, and travel—expenses that far exceeded Kunjamma's modest monthly retirement pension—she told me that she had applied for a bank loan but had been declined. The only option now was to approach a *blade*, one of the many private lending schemes floated by migrant remittances that offer quick loans at high interest rates.[4] With that money, Kunjamma mused, she would send her son back to the Gulf, and then drink poison to escape having to pay it back. At her age, she said in half-jest, this was the best contribution she could make to the family's future. Laughing now, she poured me more tea and patted my hand for the look of concern, assuring me she was only joking.

In this chapter, I focus on women's allusions to, jokes about, and fantasies of willful death, and their significance to the intelligibility and production of care among kin in middle-class family life in Kerala.[5] Kunjamma's musings on the value of her life in death, shared in passing allusion with (perhaps for?) an outsider, offer a pinhole view onto the broad repertoire of ways women invoke ending their lives in front of others, often as an ambiguous mixture of play, grave utterance, and citational performance. Such practices surfaced with difficult regularity in my interviews and observations of everyday life. Fifteen-year-old girls chatting the night before the release of their Secondary School Leaving Certificate [SSLC] exams teased one another about having to kill themselves if they failed; a mother glibly joked about "taking her daughter with her" in the event she and her husband were unable to repay the debts incurred to make cosmetic renovations to their home. Together with these examples, Kunjamma's comments point to the ways suicide surfaced in everyday interactions, not infrequently as a passing remark weighted with ambiguous yet unsettling potentiality.

Kunjamma's comments are also important for how they dramatize a moral economy of care at the scene of middle-class family life in Kerala's capital city. They recall the "horizontal gift relationship" that Lawrence Cohen (2001) describes of young men's fantasies of sacrificing a kidney for the economic reanimation of the family in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Cast in "the conservative terms of a class-specific protection of the family form," young men's sale of the "other" kidney is tied to their economic ability to get sisters married off (Cohen 2001: 25). The attrition of the body through the sacrificial gift of the kidney facilitates the payment of dowry, the movement of women, and the cycling of family cosmologies. By similarly framing her life as capital for the financial rejuvenation of the family—here

4 Called such because they "cut both ways" (Buckley 2012: 252), blades have flourished in Kerala with mass migration to the Persian Gulf states beginning in the 1970s and the resulting availability of remittances (Nair 1999: 219–20). The absence of any security requirement makes these companies an attractive option to those who need large amounts of money fast.

5 The bulk of this research was conducted over a 24-month period between 2005 and 2007, with shorter periods in 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2009.

enabled by the transnational movement of men out of the home—Kunjamma proposed the ultimate sacrificial gift. Marking at once her economic limits and the value of her life in death, this gift declared Kunjamma's care for her family.

I met many women who, like Kunjamma, understood and enacted such practices in the terms of care: that is, as practices through which they produced themselves as moral subjects caring for others, and as subjects needing—indeed, deserving of—care. In his departure from anthropological and legal categories of kinship and marriage, John Borneman (1997: 583) has proposed instead "a concern for the actual situations in which people experience the need to care and be cared for and to the political economies of their distribution." Following Borneman, I examine how invocations of suicide like Kunjamma's are critical to the enactment, distribution, and intelligibility of care and value within the middle-class household. Kunjamma's imaginings of sacrificial death were, after all, *care-full*: marked by discriminate and thoughtful planning and by concern for others. In this sense, these practices do not mark (or only mark) the failure of kin relations. Rather, they may work to catalyze or reconfigure the moral, affective, and material ties that bind. In their enactments, they evidence women's care for the reproduction of the family; in the responses they inspire, they can mobilize forms of attention and protection against injury or death.

Concern for the actual situations in which women care and are cared for must therefore grapple with the difficult entanglements between desire, vulnerability, agency, and violence at the site of women's words and bodies. It must also recognize the shifting and unequal distribution of care within households. For although Kunjamma's comments evidenced her care for others, they also reflected in grim terms an aging grandmother's precarious place in the home: while attempting to ensure the financial health of future generations, Kunjamma herself seemed little cared for at times. On the afternoon she spoke of sacrificing her life to send her son back to the Gulf, her hand rested gingerly on the swollen abdomen caused by a hernia that, for three weeks now, remained untreated. None of her children had the money at the moment to help pay for surgery, Kunjamma explained. Soon, she told me. Her words were punctuated by the click-click sounds of Kunjamma's teenage granddaughter typing away on a new desktop computer in the neighboring room—a purchase made just days before, Kunjamma told me happily, to help her get ahead in her studies.

How, then, do women grapple with shifting domestic economies of care in the context of neoliberal transformation, transnational migration, and aspirational mobility in Kerala? What role do women's invocations of death play in the making and remaking of kinship in Kerala's contemporary moment as family life is re-organized in light of the region's deepening ties to the global economy, and the expanding transnational circulation of money, goods, ideas, and people? As these processes come to bear on everyday intimacies and forms of relatedness, how do women negotiate the dependencies of family life to "keep the cares together" (Taylor 2008)?

Accumulating Death

A psychologist in Thiruvananthapuram once explained to me why women's threats had to be handled with discretion, even a healthy dose of skepticism. "Here in Kerala," he said only half-joking, "the problem of women threatening suicide looks like this: A woman will take a bottle of pills from the medicine cabinet. She may look at her husband and say, 'I'll take the pills.' She has referenced the books. She has referenced the Internet, she knows that up to five is okay on an empty stomach, and with a full stomach up to ten is okay. So she's looking at her husband, swallowing one pill, two pills, three. Then finally the husband stops her and says, 'Okay, okay! I'll get you that new car!'"

While hyperbolic in nature, this caricature is important for the ways it configures women's suicide threats as flagrantly fraudulent. Here, women's threats are a problem insofar as they dupe fearful husbands and generate frustrations for overworked clinicians, who must now deal with managing insincere threats alongside sincere ones. Cast in the most unflinching terms as the housewife who manipulates her husband for material gain, anecdotes like this one configured women's threats as a classed phenomenon: little more than bourgeois melodramatics.

Skepticism toward women's suicide threats is hardly new or unique to Kerala. As others have argued, the Western clinical literature carries with it a universe of implicitly gendered terminology around suicidal behaviors that do not end in death—that of the "threat," "gesture," and "cry for help" (Canetto 1992; Canetto and Lester 1995). Nonfatal female suicidal gestures are heavily weighted on the side of insincerity, manipulation, and false intent as contrasted to men's suicides, which are taken to convey self-determination and the will to "complete" the act. If men's suicides are typically seen as self-authored acts directed against impersonal adversities, women's suicides are read as impulsive or fraudulent acts gone awry and directed at personal troubles. In this sense, they demand skepticism as to "actual" intent. The feminization of nonfatal suicidal behavior is arguably grounded in empirical trends. Yet it is important to recognize that this construction is also ballasted by gendered ideas that "real" suicide—that which is committed with fatal intent to produce a fatal outcome—lies beyond the domain of female conduct, ideas that can be traced back to Emile Durkheim's ([1897]1951) canonical study of suicide.[6] Such is the heavy baggage that nonfatal behaviors carry through the lens of female suicidal fraudulence.

6 Durkheim ([1897]1951: 166) attributed what he identified as the relative immunity of women to suicide to the conviction that women are "fundamentally traditionalist by nature" and that they "govern their conduct by fixed beliefs and have no great intellectual needs." He ascribed the low incidence of women's suicide mortality to the allegedly organic influences of gender, suggesting that as "a more instinctive creature than man, woman has only to follow her instincts to find calmness and peace" ([1897] 1951: 272).

To sidestep these assumptions, I seek to release us from the tyranny of deciphering "sincere" suicide—a task of a different sort than my own. I focus instead on the situations and contexts in which women invoked death, so that I might elucidate the significance of these practices to the reproduction of social life. I consider in particular how such practices reconfigure or redistribute care, concern, and attention among kin. Inspired by the work of anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2003), I conceive of this broad regime of allusions to, jokes about, and fantasies of suicide as modes of "accumulating death." I draw on this notion to highlight the myriad ways women accrue tactical vulnerabilities at the site of words and bodies and do so from within life itself. This notion is also useful because it attunes us to the possibility of what may be produced under the sign of death. The accumulation of death may, for example, enable women to produce themselves as moral subjects, mobilize others to respond with heightened care and attention, shift dynamics in the household to make domestic situations more habitable for a time, or enhance the lives of other family members. The accumulation of death, in other words, may be morally or socially productive.

This suggests that life and death may not always be diametrically opposed, as ordinarily assumed. By training our focus on the reciprocities between them, we open our analytics beyond polarizing dichotomies to recognize that accumulating death may in fact be a mode of affirming or reanimating life, that tactical vulnerabilities may create possibilities for agency, and that the indeterminacy of suicide alters ways of living (Staples and Widger 2012; Widger 2009). Ethnographic attention to the ways people accumulate death also allows sensitivity to events of different scales, ranging from the quiet, ambiguous, and fugitive to the openly declarative, dramatic, and performative. It broadens our field of vision beyond the singularity of suicide as "event," acknowledging that even playful gestures or jokes shape how people live with one another, sometimes setting new horizons of fear of a graver act in the near or far off future. Accumulating death thus exceeds, but does not exclude, death itself.

The notion of accumulation also situates these practices within a larger economy of value distributed across bodies and members of the household. In this time of liberalization and global change in Kerala, the ways women accumulate death to enhance the lives of others must be understood in light of new ideas and representations of embodied value. Capital building at the site of the body is intensifying in the middle-class family, with value accrued by some members over others. The resources and energies of parenting, for instance, are increasingly funneled toward preparing children to become competitive, "high-quality" global workers and citizens (Devika 2002). Intensified child rearing through new regimes of educational, material, and developmental nurturance is now widely recognized to be a critical mode of value production in the capital city.[7] As new strategies emerge in the building and valuing of life at the site of the middle-class family,

7 On children and embodied value in marketized contexts, see Anagnost 2004, 2008; and Matza 2012.

value is often extracted from women's bodies to enhance the lives of others. Thus, as the widowed grandmother, Kunjamma stands to be sacrificed to set in motion a once-again migrating son, and the purchase of a desktop computer as a long-term investment for a granddaughter is prioritized over the remedial hernia surgery of the elderly. In the liberalizing present, the accumulation of death gives new material expression to value in the "shared" pursuit of the good life.

While such an analysis holds together diverse practices of accumulating death, my point is not to discount or erase material distinctions either in expressed intent (if any) or in the severity of some acts over others; nor is it to evade the problem of violence itself. Instead, it reflects my hesitancy to prioritize death events over the multitude of ways suicide shapes life among the living. Rather than speculating on what "really" happened or how "truly" sincere a feeling or word was, I instead yield to my own deep uncertainties around much of what I observed. This is part of my effort to acknowledge the limits to ethnographic knowledge and to keep at bay the desire to designate transparency and fixity to that which may have many lives or may be incomprehensible (Garcia 2010; Stevenson 2009). It is also an effort to capture ethnographically something of the ambiguity and indeterminacy of motivations and outcomes as they were experienced in the lives of people I spoke with and their loved ones, and thus to take seriously the power of uncertainty itself to transform reality and relations between people. The accounts to follow have been written to make the unknown constitutive of the stories themselves.

A Decent Girl, A Care-Full Death

It was just weeks into her college studies in Kerala's neighboring state of Karnataka when Kavitha's troubles began. When her cousin Meenu began dating boys on campus against the prohibitions of family, Kavitha became deeply distressed about the possible compromise of her own reputation as a "decent girl" (*anthassulla penkutti*). As news of their quickly fraying friendship reached home, Kavitha's mother blamed her daughter for failing to be more adjustable. The timid, soft-spoken 19-year-old didn't feel she could tell her mother the truth: that the problems between the cousins had to do with Meenu's alleged indiscretions and the vicious eve teasing that Kavitha was daily suffering from male classmates as a result.[8] Despite trying to distance herself from her cousin, Kavitha found herself deflecting the overtures and aggressive comments of boys on campus. Explaining that her reputation was in jeopardy regardless of her innocence in the matter, Kavitha quoted for me the familiar Malayalam proverb describing the vulnerability of women, who must bear the cost when things go wrong, regardless of how or why. "Whether the leaf falls on the thorn or the thorn falls on the leaf,"

8 *Eve teasing* is a euphemism, used in the English form in India, to describe flirtatious or aggressive behavior toward women or girls.

said Kavitha, "the leaf will have to suffer" (*Ila mullil veenaalum mullu ilayil veenaalum, kedu ilakku thanne*).

Hurt by her mother's harsh words conveyed through nightly phone calls, Kavitha weighed the options before her. As the situation on campus grew unbearable, she considered dropping her courses and returning home, a plan she ultimately dismissed as unwise, since in the minds of extended family and neighbors, only girls who fall astray are called back home without completing their studies. Concerns that girls will be "spoiled" in college, prey to influences that take hold in the absence of close family surveillance and protection, have been shown to shape family planning of female education in India.[9] Her parents' decision to allow her to study far from home had been no small matter, Kavitha explained. Her mother in particular had staunchly defended the decision to extended family. Kavitha had no intention of proving her mother wrong.

At the family's kitchen table on an afternoon her parents were at work, Kavitha recounted for me those difficult months. She was home from college on holiday, her graduation just on the horizon. It had been nearly three years since these events transpired, but Kavitha recalled those days with a troubled, restless urgency. Keen at the time to avoid the harmful rumors that would circulate with a premature return, she had considered her limited alternatives. Killing herself, Kavitha had decided in the midst of those torturous days, was most certainly the better option. It would, of course, have had to be disguised as an accident, she explained with a shy smile. Had it appeared as a suicide to others, they would have suspected a failed love affair or even pregnancy. That would have been far worse than returning home prematurely, she said, her eyes growing wide. She had no wish for such disgrace to fall upon her parents and brother. No, certainly not. Kavitha mentioned a steep bluff a few miles away from campus. During the rainy season, its grassy slopes became slick. "If you fall from the cliff, it can look like you just slipped and fell down," she told me. "'She just slipped,' they can say."

With her memories punctuated by self-conscious, nervous laughter, Kavitha spoke of suicide as an escape. But she also spoke of suicide as an act of love. Ending her life would spare her family the pain of learning about the harassment she had suffered. Kavitha expressed the greatest concern for her elder brother. She hadn't wished to cause him any distress over her situation, particularly since at the time he was working his first job as an engineer in the United States. He had his own worries, she told me. "I never talked about any of these things with him back then," Kavitha said. "He would call me from Texas, but I would only talk about good things. How could I say anything to him?" It was Kavitha's brother who had been most staunchly against her studying so far from home. Several months of reassurance had been needed to win his consent. Even after relenting, he continued

9 Mukhopadhyay and Seymour 1994. These concerns have been dramatized in Malayalam films such as the popular feature *Pavithram* (Purity), in which the moral decline of young Cochu begins with her move from her home in the village to college life in the city and ends with her participation in a local beauty contest. See Lukose 2005 for an analysis.

to worry for his sister's welfare. "When I was in college," Kavitha recounted, "he was already so tense anyway, wondering, would I fall into any trouble? Would there be any trouble for me?" Growing quiet, she reflected, "If I told him about what was happening to me with the boys at the college, he might be so sad. So sad and unable to do anything." Kavitha saw in her death the chance to release her family from the pain of troubling secrets, a death that was curiously emptied of the pain of mourning.

Speaking in retrospect of those dark days, Kavitha framed suicide as an unavoidable sacrifice to protect those she loved most. Hers would be a most care-full death, one that would thoughtfully spare, by her account, the hurt feelings of others while also protecting her family's reputation in its deliberate execution as an accident. In constructing herself as a caring subject, Kavitha demonstrated her concern for her parents' welfare after her death. She also staked claims to needing care, positioning herself by contrast as little cared for—as having to turn to friends at a time when she felt most abandoned by her mother.

Much of our conversation that afternoon revolved around Kavitha recounting how she had spoken openly about her thoughts of suicide with friends and their expressions of support and affection for her. When troubles at the college were running high, she turned to peers: "I used to talk to my friends about suicide and they would say, 'No, don't think about it.' I told them that my situation was so bad, that I can't bear it anymore, I'll do something. They would say, 'No, you shouldn't do that. If you do that, what will your parents' state be? What will your brother's state be?'" Kavitha's response to her friends underscores the relative value she attributed to her life as compared with her brother's. "'They have a son. He will look after them so they won't be that sad,' I would tell them. Then my friends would say, 'How can you say that? No, your parents need both of you.'"

Reflecting on the solace she was able to find during those weeks, Kavitha emphasized that it was her college classmates, not her family, who were "really the ones supporting me at the time." Accumulating death in this way, she galvanized sympathy, care, and concern through lateral peer connections. Fantasies of suicide were also autotherapeutic. They opened up an elegiac space in which Kavitha could imagine and mourn a world without her. In conversations with friends in which she staged the loss her parents and brother would suffer over her death, Kavitha rehearsed and reanimated the affective ties that tethered her to her parents and brother. Dwelling in this state of loss and fantasy, she channeled her frustrations with the young men at her college and the hurt over her mother's reproach into higher feminine virtue: that of self-sacrificing love for the family.

Much has been written about the importance of ideologies of self-sacrifice to constructions of "Indian" femininity and their ties to discourses of cultural nationalism. Partha Chatterjee (1989) suggests that beginning in the nineteenth century, women and an idea of Indian Womanhood were positioned as icons of the moral and cultural reproduction of home and nation. As Chatterjee (1989: 630) observes, this nationalist construct attributes "the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on" to femininity, which

comes to stand "as a sign for 'nation.'" As Indian nationalisms of different shades have produced their variants of the good (Hindu) wife, themes of suffering and self-sacrifice have also been shown to operate as organizing tropes in political and legal spheres as powerfully as they do in idealizations of middle-class femininity in popular culture.[10] The icon of the self-sacrificing wife has emerged as an ambivalent presence in colonial and postcolonial discourses concerning the practice of *sati*, which have featured, among other ideological constructions, an idealized figure of the widow who "willingly" casts herself onto her husband's pyre out of selfless devotion.[11]

In the middle-class neighborhood where I lived, themes of self-sacrifice also emerged in the ways women understood and constructed themselves as gendered subjects. To suffer (*sahikkuka*), and to do so willingly and selflessly, was a key trope in women's moral self-making. It intersected with the accumulation of death as a technology of the self that in the home could be as subtle as eating only after one's husband and children are sated and as brutal as suicide. But it is critical not to assume that "self-sacrifice" and its practices carry universal and already constituted meanings. These are not timeless ethical sentiments; nor are they the "innate" qualities of gender or culture. In instances in which the women I spoke with drew on ideas and practices of suicide as sacrifice to understand and construct themselves as moral subjects, these ideas and practices were fluid and shifting. Carefully designed to spare feelings and protect her family's reputation, Kavitha's planned death responded to particular conditions and pressures that threaten to warp class-specific notions of female respectability in contemporary Kerala. It navigated, for instance, the marked tension between increasing access to women's education and the moral anxieties in the family that accompany it, a tension that was shared across the household but came to bear most pressingly on Kavitha. In deeming her life eliminable in relation to that of her brother, the terms of Kavitha's sacrifice were also shaped by new ideas and representations of embodied value in a time of liberalization and global change. By Kavitha's calculus, sparing the emotional distress of her brother—a global worker with intensified resource-bearing capacities—took priority over her own sacrificeable

10 On how Indian law, citizenship, and the state define political rights and cultural identities through gendered categories, including the female "victim," see Rajan 2003. On the discourse of women's adjustability in South Asia, see Ring 2006; and Singh and Uberoi 1994.

11 Demonstrating how colonial discourses of sati operated as the site on which to stage conflicts and debates over definitions of Hindu tradition and the civilizing missions of colonialism, Mani (1998) argues that the ideological construction of the devoted wife coexisted ambivalently with other constructions. British "official" discourse produced around sati also constructed an alternate configuration of the Indian widow as a forced, unwilling victim. "Colonial officials systematically ignored such evidence of the widows as subjects with a will of their own … The widow thus nowhere appears as a full subject. If she resisted, she was considered a victim of male barbarity. If she conceded, she was seen to be a victim of religion" (Mani 1998: 117).

life. As moral and material economies in the relationships between bodies and values are transformed in the liberalizing present, women like Kavitha spend ideas and practices of "chosen" death in new ways of enhancing others.

Through death, Kavitha imagined bearing the ultimate cost to spare others emotional harm and to protect the class-specific terms of her family's reputation. Like other women I met, she spoke of her death in the terms of care, producing herself as a moral subject caring for others and as a subject needing and deserving of care. Yet in framing her chosen silence and willful death as noble sacrifice, Kavitha elided the abuse and shame she may have met at the hands of family had they come to know the truth she had been hiding about her cousin. This narrative of sacrifice also transmuted into female virtue the profound humiliation that Kavitha felt in being the sexualized target of rowdy college boys and that further motivated her secrecy. It was also shaped by her acute sensitivity to her family's contentious decision to send her away for degree studies—a decision Kavitha's mother continues even now to defend to extended family members. Kavitha mobilized sentiments of love and concern to construct herself as a moral subject caring for family, but these same discourses veiled the coercive power relations upon which this loving home is built, relations that magnetized around the surveillance and potentially violent control of women's sexualities. Narrated as an act of care and the ultimate sacrifice, Kavitha's imagined suicide also disciplined the threat of rogue female (hetero)sexuality with the promise of death.

If at times the accumulation of death works to reinforce the affective and ideological scaffolding of the respectable family, at others it emerges at kinship's fault lines, exposing the quiet dissolution of intimacies and commitments among family members. Through the story of Lata and her mother, we next encounter the "internal precariousness" of kinship (Pinto 2011) and the disappointments and failures that are the underside of accumulating death.

A Precious Child and the Precariousness of Kinship

Lata awoke one morning to a knock on her bedroom door. In the early morning light, she discerned the face of her mother, Aleyamma, peering through the crack in the doorway. In her half-waking state, she vaguely heard her mother inquire after the step stool Lata had taken the day before to dust the shelves above her desk. When Lata asked her mother why she needed it, her mother replied simply, "I have something to do."

Days before, Lata's parents had learned of their daughter's relationship with a young man and their wish to marry. Although Kannan came from a respected middle-class family of government civil servants and held a master's degree in computer engineering, Lata's family had firmly rejected the proposal, surrendering to pressure from relatives that Lata's marriage to a low-caste Pulaya man would shame them all. In the face of Lata's equally firm refusal to marry another, Aleyamma had spent those days trying to sway her strong-willed daughter but to

no avail. Her attempts at reasoning with Lata eventually gave way to caustic words and, finally, to Aleyamma lying in bed for days behind closed doors. At the time, I had stopped by unannounced for a visit, unaware then of what was unfolding. Aleyamma's husband invited me in briefly, asking me to come by another day: "Auntie has a fever." In the eerily silent house, I could see piles of unwashed dishes in the kitchen.

Nearly two and a half years later in the comfort of Kannan's home, her one-year-old daughter peacefully napping in her arms, Lata recounted for me what had happened that early morning hour when Aleyamma woke her up. It was her mother's odd request for the stool that triggered Lata's suspicion. "When I asked her again why she needed it, she said she wanted something off the top shelf in the kitchen," Lata recalled. "But then I thought, she never stores anything that high up. So I thought I should take a look." As Lata descended the staircase, still groggy from sleep, she heard the loud whir of the ceiling fan set to maximum speed. In the kitchen, she caught sight of her mother perched precariously on the step stool, reaching up to the fan with the end of her sari, wrapped several times around her neck. By Lata's account, Aleyamma paused and turned to stare at her daughter. Lata calmly continued past the kitchen doorway to her parents' bedroom where she roused her father from sleep. He was the one who ran into the kitchen and drew Aleyamma down from the stool.

Long before these events transpired and before Lata would run away from home in the middle of the night to elope, things had been different. On many afternoons, Lata and I would go on outings around the city together or read women's magazines and chat about campus life in her bedroom. On a handful of occasions, she would vaguely mention a "good friend" at her college whom she hoped one day I would have the chance to meet. On other afternoons, Aleyamma plied me with sweets and tea and told me stories about growing up in rural Kerala, her family, and her hopes for her children. Over the span of several years, I had grown close with mother and daughter, each in different ways. After they became alienated from one another, it was difficult and painful to negotiate these relationships. While they have since reconciled, there were many intervening years when each argued passionately to me that she was right and the other wrong. As Aleyamma tells it, her daughter drove her to desperation and suicide. As Lata tells it, her mother had different motivations.

On the afternoon that Lata chose, quite out of the blue, to recount for me the events with her mother in that early morning, I asked her why she hadn't intervened. By walking past the kitchen, Lata registered her stolid refusal to believe. Adamant that Aleyamma had staged the entire episode, she explained that her mother had planned to arouse suspicion by asking for the step stool. For in addition to the early morning disruption, what announced "suicide" in such certain terms for Lata even before she went down to investigate was the distinctive mise-en-scène implied in Aleyamma's request: the step stool indexed the means (hanging) and the place (the kitchen) conventionally equated with female suicide in this context. What Lata described was a gendered trope within an overdetermined visual economy of

suicide, one immediately familiar even to me from Malayalam film and television. Lata claimed her mother was counting on her to draw these implicit connections: step stool, kitchen, suicide. Aleyamma had, by Lata's account, carefully laid out her props, not unlike a "scene in a film."

Several months into their silence, on the first occasion I saw her after Lata's marriage, Aleyamma looked wearied and worn. She seemed to have aged overnight. Only in glimpses now did I see the ebullient woman I knew. Aleyamma and I spoke in retrospect about her desperate efforts to reason with Lata in the days after learning about Kannan. Over tea, she explained to me how she had chronicled to Lata all the comforts her daughter had been given growing up—nice clothes, a comfortable house, a quality education. At the very least, Aleyamma had begged, Lata should give up Kannan in recognition of how much—and here I was inventoried literal amounts in lakh rupees—her parents had invested in Lata's bachelor degree and her master's degree in commerce. Aleyamma rendered a material and moral accounting of resources, time, and hopes invested in Lata, using a language of reciprocity to invite Lata to return in kind. In doing so, Aleyamma linked the fulfillment of Lata's potential to the forms of educational investment widely recognized as an important regime of value in Kerala. By Aleyamma's accounting, Lata's costly postgraduate education and the family's wider endeavors at upward mobility would be thrown away with such an imprudent marital choice. If she chose Kannan, Aleyamma told Lata, all would have been for nothing.

"If you marry such a boy, then what was the purpose (*uddesyam*) of all this?" Aleyamma recalled asking Lata, gesturing broadly at our well-appointed surroundings. Pointing to the material and symbolic home built with the express purpose of nurturing Lata to her highest human potential, Aleyamma suggested that it would all come crumbling to its foundations if Lata chose unwisely. The prospect that Lata's valuable life and the precious time, resources, and energy it signified would be squandered through marriage to a lower-caste man would mean that Aleyamma's own value as a mother would, too, be wasted. All of this had led to what Aleyamma used the English term "depression" to describe the condition, she told me, that had pushed her to suicide. Accumulating death may have been Aleyamma's broken acceptance of the destruction of everything. Or perhaps it was the most powerful means she saw to compel Lata to choose the path to the social destiny Aleyamma had laid out for her. Maybe accumulating death was the only way for a mother to ensure the good life she had gifted her most precious child.

The inscrutability of Aleyamma's intentions—intentions mistrusted by Lata, feared by Aleyamma's husband, and confusing to me still—would reorganize alliances and dependencies in the family in the weeks, months, and years to come. The afternoon Aleyamma revisited those difficult days, our conversation was punctuated by long silences. She spoke achingly of her loss, a pain she felt as the heaviness in her chest, in her pounding and chronic headaches, and in the ghostly quiet of the home. All of Lata's things were still in the house—her books, her clothes— exactly where they all had been the night she departed. Symbolically left behind, it felt to me, for Lata to begin a new and different life of value. As they

started to gather dust, the objects around Aleyamma announced a gaping absence. No Lata to keep her company in the kitchen in the early morning hours as she prepared the day's meals, sighed Aleyamma. No one to watch evening teleserials with. Losing her precious child, Aleyamma said, as if she were dead.

* * *

Aleyamma's inventorying of parental nurturance, now manifest in Lata as accumulated capital, should have inspired, in this mother's hopes, a reciprocal act of care. But rather than read into her education and comfortable upbringing an obligation to her parents, Lata had instead counted her master's degree among the privileges that would help her to elope and, if necessary, cut ties with her family. As she would explain to me on an afternoon long after these events had transpired, Lata had looked hopefully to her education as the means to a happy future with Kannan. Her educational capital was now hers to invest elsewhere, diverted from her natal family to the making of a new companionate life with her husband. At the time when they were planning to marry, Lata had been convinced that Kannan would be able to leverage his computer engineering degree into a high-paying job, maybe even one overseas. She hadn't felt reliant upon the dowry she would have otherwise brought into an arranged marriage. As new high-salaried careers in Kerala's IT industries enable young adults to attain financial solvency earlier, couples like Kannan and Lata are increasingly able to mobilize their own resources to support the marital life of their choosing, sometimes without the consent or economic support of family. For Lata, ideas of romantic love, paired with the possibilities for new forms of work and migration overseas, allowed her to see in her educational capital less an enduring obligation to her parents than the key to her emancipation.

Accumulating death can operate as an ambivalent mode of address: even though condemnatory, it may also contain within it the invitation to reparation and redress. This is an invitation not simply to concede or surrender to the other's will but, more powerfully, to legitimate and testify to the ties that bind past, present, and future selves together. Insofar as Aleyamma's act was an invitation for Lata to choose her parents over Kannan, it evidently faltered on recognition. Lata did not, and indeed refused to, see herself as responsible for Aleyamma's distress. It is here, in the fulfillment or breakdown of recognition, that the accumulation of death encounters its possibilities and limits. So incredulous was Lata that when Aleyamma later blamed her daughter's insolence as the reason for her suicide attempt, Lata returned a scathing retort. She urged her mother on: "Go ahead and kill yourself. You've had over fifty years of a life. I have only started mine." In declaring the relative value of her young life over her mother's, however, Lata also threatened to destroy it by her own hand, announcing in front of her parents that she, too, would kill herself if forced to marry another. But unlike her mother's, Lata had warned, her intentions would be sincere enough to succeed.

Kinship relations are not fixed entities afforded transcendence through biology. Far from being a static and completed project as the anthropologist's webbed

charts of squares and circles might suggest, kinship relations require ongoing maintenance. They are an everyday "doing" wherein "their order in the world is not a thing accomplished for all time, but an achievement needing constant recreation" (Rosaldo 1982: 223). If hierarchies, dependencies, obligations, and affections must be continually renewed to maintain a working domestic order, Aleyamma's act brought this renewal process to a head. To the extent that Aleyamma's act summoned Lata to compensate for cares of the past with obeisance in the presence, it had evidently failed to deliver.

Lata's skepticism of her mother's actions suggests that in this case, the accumulation of death did not communicate transparently, nor did it reconfigure social relations in any predictable way. While Lata dismissed Aleyamma's morning episode as manipulation, news of it mobilized immediate action on the part of others, reorganizing care along other axes of the family. Lata's elder sister, married and living farther north in the state, withdrew her support of Lata. Pressuring Lata to give up Kannan, she issued a stern warning that if anything were to happen to their parents, the responsibility for "the two dead bodies taken from the house" would fall upon Lata's head. As Aleyamma's distress materialized in the otherwise taken-for-granted smooth running of the household—in mounting piles of unwashed dishes and late or missed family meals—her husband, too, expressed concern. He took Aleyamma to a psychiatrist. Aleyamma once showed me the anti-depressants she had been taking regularly since that visit to the psychiatrist. Perching her reading glasses on her nose, she rifled carefully through an old leather purse repurposed to store the family's prescriptions. Finding the one she was looking for, she carefully unfolded the slip of paper and smoothed it out on the tabletop. A sample tablet removed from its foil and placed in my hand was presented as if to announce in material terms the suffering Lata had caused. Aleyamma reminded me that she had never before been to a psychiatrist, "only when I came to know about the secret of their relationship. My brother-in-law, he told the psychiatrist to help me because what Lata did was a very big shock to me. Lata was the reason."

For Aleyamma, the accumulation of death catalyzed forms of pharmaceutical care and concern for her condition. It did so by mobilizing patriarchal relations in the family in a manner that positioned Aleyamma as injured, requiring the intervention of others. While anti-depressants afforded Aleyamma consolation—"when I'm taking the medicines, the sadness goes away"—it was the label of depression that, in the eyes of extended kin, offered material evidence of what Lata had done. As reproachable as Lata's pursuit of a love affair outside marriage was to gossiping family, it was her alleged neglect of her mother's suffering that aggravated charges of sexual laxity with accusations of carelessness, selfishness, and cruelty. Aleyamma's conscription into a pharmacological regime worked to realign economies of care within and between households, with Aleyamma consoled as the betrayed mother and Lata ostracized as the wayward daughter. If Lata's departure severed her ties to her parents, it also generated in its wake a web of reconfirmed commitments and forms of protection among those who remained behind.

Vanishing Points

As anthropologists have shown, care generated in conditions of vulnerability can remake possibilities for living in powerful ways. In rendering intelligible assertions of care and accusations of its lack, the accumulation of death can force kin "to evaluate who has felt love for whom" (Klaits 2009:6), reconfiguring rather than simply undoing connections among family members.[12] In this sense, invocations of suicide in daily life may be situated on a continuum with other ways by which women accumulate death, where the attrition of life and life-building are intimately intertwined in the reproduction of the hegemonic family form. They may find kinship, for example, with practices as quotidian as eating only after one's elder brothers, husband, or children have been sated. These continuities are important to highlight, lest the forms of death-making discussed here be inaccurately represented as anomalous or exceptional in their bundling of life and death.

This spectrum also suggests the utility of thinking through these practices as "domesticated," a term I use here polysemically. The term "domesticated" signals the relational nature of these practices and the ways they pull others into their orbit, serving in some cases to enhance the lives of family members, as it was for Kunjamma, while in other cases implicating kin neglect or mistreatment, as we saw with Aleyamma. To refer to these practices as "domesticated" also signals the inversion by which violence ends up directed toward the self rather than against others: Kavitha, for instance, fantasized about her carefully planned death rather than about directly confronting her antagonists.[13] Finally, we can think of these practices as "domesticated" insofar as death is folded into the everyday in unsettling yet *familiar* forms—in the way, for example that the step stool in the kitchen triggered Lata's suspicions, appearing to her as a prop in "a scene in a film." Death is tamed in this sense, involving legible cultural artifacts and social forms. Yet an element of wildness and of excess remains, as evidenced by the uncertainty that shrouds all of the stories recounted here.

Attention to the diversity of ways women accumulate death as a mode of altering ways of living or to enhance the lives of others may help to cut loose the tethers that so tightly bind suicide to the pathological, the irrational, and the anti-

12 On care and vulnerability, see Garcia 2010; Han 2012; Klaits 2010; and Livingston 2012. But see also Ticktin 2011.

13 Spencer (1990) suggests that where patriarchal power relations and local ideas of female respectability render women's overt physical violence toward others untenable, suicide may provide an "acceptable" means for them to express aggression. Violence channeled against the self can be deeply interpersonal, for it not only communicates anger and grief; it can also accuse and punish those who were the victim's tormentors in life. Writing about troubling rates of female suicide in Sri Lanka, Malathi de Alwis (2012: 48) observes, "One's intimates are perceived as extensions of one's self so that harming oneself is tantamount to harming them; they must watch you suffer, they must bear the moral burden." On the communicative nature of women's suicide in South Asia, specifically Sri Lanka, see de Alwis 2012; Marecek 1998; Marecek and Senadheera 2012; Spencer 1990; and Widger 2009, 2012.

social. It may also serve to complicate easy assumptions that rising suicide is the result of growing atomism and individualization in modern life, for these stories suggest that these women sought death in part out of felt obligation to others. But if the accumulation of death mobilized forms of care, we must also ask what that care consisted of. In some cases, it generated attention mediated by pharmaceuticals. For Aleyamma, anti-depressants legitimated her moral positioning as the wronged mother. But for other women I met, psychiatric intervention brought exclusion, brute disciplinary management, and neglect.

Care from friends or kin could also facilitate women's endurance of violence by appealing to higher female virtue, as we saw in Kavitha's story. In some cases, accumulating death catalyzed forms of masculinist protection in ways that reinforced the conservative terms of gender hierarchies in the family. It mobilized certain patriarchal relations against others, positioning women as victims needing the intervention of husbands against mother-in-laws, or of elder brothers against external threats. Consider how Kavitha's situation was ultimately resolved when she found the strength to tell her brother what was happening on campus. Her brother's response—immediate and, ultimately, effective—was to recruit friends back home in Kerala to intimidate and rough up the boys causing Kavitha so much trouble. Life, Kavitha said, became bearable again. What is the nature of care that is produced through vengeance or reparative violence? While offering means for women to negotiate the dependencies of family life, these accounts suggest that forms of care produced under the sign of death can quickly become complicit with coercion and violence within and beyond the household.

Finally, we should not lose sight of the incommensurabilities that render women's lives most valuable through and against the promise of death. That all of these acts and fantasies of suicide were themselves care-full in one way or another—oriented with concern and love for others—signifies how even in death these women bore the ponderous responsibility of ensuring the continuation of family cosmologies in ways that others did not. The insistent fact remains that Kunjamma, Kavitha, and Aleyamma defined care at the point of transgression, where death revealed the singular magnitude of their worth. It was also where exclusion, punishment, and medical management stood close by. Women's accumulation of death may at times reconfigure or catalyze kin life, generating forms of attentiveness and care, but it also erodes in brute ways. This is the vanishing point of the domestic everyday, where the lines of life and death converge with each other.

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Chapter 9

Learning Suicide and the Limits of Agency: Children's "Suicide Play" in Sri Lanka

Tom Widger[1]

This chapter addresses an old question in suicidology—*how* do people become suicidal?—from the perspective of how people *become people* through suicidal practices. Thus I am less interested in how people become suicidal as a result of "problems," than I am in how developing a concept of self-destruction can be a fundamental process of identity formation, and one that has significant implications for the emergence of an awareness of agency and its possibilities and limitations. In the suicidological literature, suicide has been variously understood as the ultimate loss of agency: as a response taken when there is "no other way out" (Beck 1976; Williams 1997), or else when social conditions compel it (Durkheim 1951). Alternatively, suicide has been construed the ultimate expression of protest, agency, and even of freedom: an "aesthetic" act (Andriolo 2006; Osborne 2005). Meanwhile, ethnographic analyses of suicide have explored the interplay between questions of "structure and agency" in diverse contexts around the world, and shown how these kinds of questions spring from, and are dealt with using, local cosmological frameworks (in addition to the chapters in this volume, also see Staples 2012; Staples and Widger 2012).

In Buddhist Sri Lanka, many people understand questions of what social scientists call "structure and agency," the extent to which human behavior is shaped by external forces or individual choices, in terms of *kamma* (karma) (see Gombrich 1971 for a detailed discussion). In the Madampe Division of western Sri Lanka, the ethnographic situ of this chapter, the passage of one's own life and the manner of one's own death is generally thought predestined by good and bad deeds in past lives as well as in this life. Whether or not the logic of *kamma* literally means that all things people say and do are an unavoidable fate, or whether people have the ability to make decisions and thus escape the

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clutches of fate, is of course a subject of much discussion—as is the question of whether all actions and decisions necessarily have kammatic consequences. The Buddhist scholar Narada Mahāthera (1988) suggests that only an "intentional action whether mental, verbal, or physical is regarded as *kamma* … involuntary, unintentional, or unconscious actions do not constitute *kamma*." My lay Buddhist informants in Madampe, who saw actions guided by intention as having kammatic consequences and actions that were seemingly spontaneous or circumscribed by unavoidable external pressures as having no kammatic consequences, also expressed this general principle (Widger 2015a).

When applied to suicide, this view of *kamma* helped people in Madampe to distinguish between what might be glossed "predestined suicides" and "chosen suicides" with the one unlikely to produce kammatic effects and the other constituting *kamma*. Working with young female self-harmers in southern Sri Lanka, Marecek and Senadheera (2012) report how those women frequently dismissed what they did as a "foolish thing" and "foolish act" (ibid.: 76), and thus stressed their self-harm was "predestined." Marecek and Senadheera suggest the reference to "foolishness" fulfils a social function, used by self-harming women to distance themselves from agentive intent and thus the allocation of blame and negative *kamma* for their actions. In so doing, claiming the absence of agency "[seals] off family strife from further probing … [enabling] family members to co-exist; it may thus serve as a collective need" (ibid.). In western Sri Lanka, my work with young male and female self-harmers in Madampe suggested that laying claim to anger as a particular cause of self-harm provided an idiom that explicitly sought to challenge the collective need, disrupting *kamma* for both self and others, and thus stressing a suicidal agency (Widger 2012b). Similarly, Spencer (1990) noted that in Sri Lanka acts of suicide can result in "karmic entrapment" causing significant "de-merit" (*pav*) for those people, usually close relatives, whose actions may have led to the suicide.

In this chapter, I explore the developmental processes through which these two views of *kamma* and suicide—as something predestined and something chosen—come about. Through such claims, the use of suicide in social relationships in Madampe, typically in response to and as a form of relational violence, exists as a method of moral regulation of both the self and others. Bambi Chapin (2010, 2014) has explored the early socialization techniques used by caregivers in a Sinhala Buddhist village in central Sri Lanka, which she argues unfold through an increased awareness in children of the moral dangers of *irisiyāva* (desire, envy, jealousy) and importance of *läjja* (shame, shyness). Chapin's argument simply stated is that as they grow older, Sinhala children become increasingly concerned to exhibit morally "good" (*hoňda*) behavior and reject "bad" (*naraka*) behavior as a way of avoiding *irisiyāva* and thus also *läjja*, which Chapin goes on to suggest forms a central component in the development of a moral self. For Chapin, this manifests in a child that becomes increasingly conscious of its dependency upon others, marking a pathway into older childhood and teenage years shaped by a strong recognition of, and subservience to, morally "good" behaviors and social hierarchies.

Through an examination of children's and teenagers' suicidal practices, I consider how suicidal identities and understandings of *kamma* are acquired through childhood socialization processes. My concern is with what Lave and Wenger (1991) called "situated learning" within "communities of practice"—in this case, situated learning within communities of suicidal practice. Lave and Wenger studied apprentices and the ways in which they move from being "peripheral participants" in a trade to becoming full participants of a community of practice. Their studies showed how apprentices learn the knowledge and skills required to become accepted participants of a community of practice through processes of what is usually non-verbal instruction and copying. This exposure facilitates the slow development of relevant expertise in apprentices as they hang around with master craftsmen and "absorb" their knowledge. Thus, Lave and Wenger stress the importance of *participation* as a means of learning: it is literally through doing that people learn and habitus develops, and people master the necessary skills to mature and join the adult world. Bloch (2012: 193) argues that this process resembles how cultural knowledge more generally is transmitted, to which I would add how knowledge about suicide, including how, when, and why to commit suicide, is transmitted (Widger, 2015b).

Yet the learning process is itself agentive (Bandura 2001) and the passage from "peripheral" to "full" participants of a community of practice may not be one of uncritical knowledge acquisition. Not only is learning imperfect in the sense that knowledge and skills may unintentionally morph and change as they pass from one generation to the next, but learners themselves, in the process of internalizing knowledge and skills, may reshape what has been passed on so it better fits with their particular understanding of the world. Thus in this chapter I am interested in how peripheral participants in a community of suicidal practice—children and young teenagers—are not simply neophytes in liminal spaces engaged in prototypical suicidal acts but full participants in their own practice community. Distinguishing between what Bloch (2008) calls the "transactional" and the "transcendental," I argue that specific material relationships of suicide—its quotidian causes and effects—exist at the transactional level, whilst suicide's explanation through social institutions of kin morality and kammatic religion—culturally elaborated theories about its ultimate origins—exists at the transcendental level. Children's community of practice is shaped first by a transcendental suicidal of kin morality, with a transcendental suicidal of *kamma* appearing at a later stage of concept development.

To illustrate this, I focus on how Madampe children use structured games, imaginative play, and subversive jokes to explore the conditionalities, continuities, and contradictions of the social and moral possibilities of suicide. Through their own *participation* in suicide as peripheral actors—that is, as people considered not mature enough to understand suicide or to experience the kinds of problems that cause suicide, but nevertheless who perform a range of suicidal acts—children come to imbue suicide with meanings relevant to their own lives, and which exist apart from adults' understandings. I argue that through such activities both "imagined" and "real," children eventually master the *kamma* of suicide, learn when, how,

and with what consequences suicidal acts may or may not be performed, and thus make a necessary step towards attaining adulthood: a stage of life that minimizes the "agency" of suicide and promotes the "structured" or "predestined" of suicide as an ascription of gendered hierarchies. From this perspective, in Madampe *how* people become suicidal is a developmental process that begins from early childhood, and exists alongside processes of moral and religious knowledge construction. Children start off believing that suicide is chosen and linked to a transcendental kin morality, but as they grow older come to think of suicide more as something predestined and linked to a transcendental logic of *kamma*.

Orientations

Lying some 40 miles north of Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, Madampe is best described as a peri-urban locality, being comprised of two towns and numerous suburbs and villages running into each other, interspersed by coconut estates and the occasional paddy field. By the 2001 census, the Madampe Division had a population of around 43,500, supported by a mixed economy of plantation agriculture, light manufacturing, public and private sector service, and overseas labor migration. The area is primarily Sinhala Buddhist, and sandwiched between the largely Roman Catholic coastline and fishing villages five miles to the west, and the Kandyan "Up Country" 30 or so miles to the east.

I have conducted research in Madampe since 2004, first during a two-year fieldwork trip for my PhD, with follow up trips in 2007 and 2012–2013. Previous to that I had lived in Madampe for several months in 2001, when I taught English in a local school. During my main research period between 2004 and 2006, I conducted ethnographic studies of two villages in the Division, as well as several organizations—the local hospital, police station, coroners' court, and mental health clinic—that dealt with suicidal practices occurring in the area. Each of those organizations held records of varying periods and detail concerning the cases of suicide attempt and self-inflicted death they dealt with. I also had the opportunity to interview patients and staff, as well as to sit in on some counselling sessions. Meanwhile, the ethnographic materials I collected from village contexts on the prevailing contexts and conditions, and causes and meanings, of suicidal practice, provided frameworks for understanding the individual cases that I recorded within the institutions as well as those I encountered in the field.

From these various sources, I was able to develop a detailed understanding of the demographic and cultural patterns of suicidal practice in Madampe: "the field of suicidalities" by, through, and within which local understandings of suicide developed and suicidal practices took place. This included the ways in which children and young teenagers engaged with popular beliefs about suicide as well as their own kinds of suicidal practice. This particular strand of research was of course especially challenging. As much as possible it involved a "naturalistic" approach where I simply recorded in my fieldnotes the various ways in which

children and youth responded to acts of suicide around them, the commentaries and jokes they made about them, and the ways in which parents sought to explain or shield children from cases occurring in the family or community.

However, I also came across examples where even very young children had seemingly been involved in a kind of "make-believe" suicidal practice, at times resulting in hospitalization. With parents' permission and as part of a general informal discussion concerning the children's experiences of hospital care, I carefully enquired about the circumstances leading to their injuries. In these interviews it was not suitable or indeed possible to glean anything more than the most basic information, but I found out enough to establish some simple facts about the cases including something about the chain of events involved. When coupled with the observations I was making in the field, plus my much deeper research into older youth and adult suicide, I came to appreciate the significance of children's ideas about suicide both in terms of their own lives and in terms of how suicide is learned.

Learning Suicide: Games, Play, and Jokes in the Development of Suicidal Personhood

For many people the idea that some children may have suicidal thoughts or try to commit suicide is horrifying. Commenting on prevailing attitudes in western societies, Pfeffer et al. (1993) suggest that childhood is widely construed a period of life relatively free from the stresses and strains that motivate older teenagers and adults to kill themselves and that children lack the developmental maturity to think or act upon suicidal thoughts. If suicide should arise, adults dismiss it as "childish play" or a non-reflexive repeating of witnessed practices. The thought of child suicide was equally horrifying for most adults, including health professionals and social workers, I knew in Madampe. Many simply dismissed the possibility of child suicide at all, claiming that if it did occur it was the result of accident or thoughtless imitation, or possibly *boruva*, lies and make-believe (for an analysis of *boruva* see Argenti-Pillen 2007). However, Mishara (1999) found that by the ages of eight or nine American children have a thorough understanding of suicide and that younger children understand the concept of "killing oneself" in a fully developed sense. Similarly, Goldman and Beardslee (1999) suggest that nearly 1 percent of American schoolchildren aged less than 14 years have attempted to harm themselves. Likewise, according to the hospital and police records I reviewed in Madampe, self-harming practices appeared from around seven years in both boys and girls, and the youngest suicide I recorded was of a girl aged just 12 years.

It was whilst collecting those data that I happened across a number of cases of "accidental" self-harm committed by even younger children aged between four and seven years. According to the clinical notes, the children had acted individually, in pairs, or in groups of up to four, and in all cases consumed either *känēru* seeds or *neīngala* roots, two of the most popular methods of self-harm in Madampe.

Fortunately, none of the children died or suffered lasting injury. Further interviews with the attending medical officers suggested the cases occurred in the context of a simple "imitation" of adult cases of self-harm the children had witnessed or heard about in their families, villages, or schools. However, my own interviews with the children, coupled with my much broader set of observations of children in Madampe, suggested they had acted with a great deal more thought than the medical staff had granted them. Not only were the children "imitating" suicidal practices involving imaginary contexts reflective of their own lives and concerns rather than those simply of adults, but in so doing children were making explicit statements about their lives, their relationships with others, and their perceived ability or inability to control or shape the future.

At the simplest level, children's "make-believe" engagement with suicide took the form of structured games exploring the material manners and means of suicidal practice in Madampe. In that sense, suicide games involved a process through which children passed from peripheral participants to full participants in a community of suicidal practice by learning its methods and reasoning. For example, in several of the cases the children had mixed the *känēru* seeds they had swallowed with water and sugar, which is popularly believed by adults to make the toxins contained within the seed more potent: "that is the correct way to prepare *känēru*," many people told me. Thus, suicide games allowed children to master elements of what I have called the "poison complex": a core pattern of linguistic, emotional, social, and spatial practices clustered around poisonous substances from which suicidal practices emerge (Widger 2015b). Having prepared poisons in appropriate ways and consumed them, children went on to tell a parent or older sibling what they had done, in much the same way as some adult self-harmers do when they wish to assign blame for their actions. Reflecting adults' narratives, both girls and boys told me that the point of suicide was to make somebody "afraid" (*baya*), so to affect a change in their beliefs or behaviors. In this way, children were literally practicing adults' suicidal practices and becoming adept at them.

Yet in other ways, children's suicide games diverged from those practices associated with "mature" suicidal performances. This was especially when children invoked suicide as part of games dealing with issues of relevance to them. In this case, structured game shifted into spontaneous play: an imaginative, unstructured engagement with suicide and its meanings that generated its own field of practice belonging to children only. Thus, suicide play often explored issues to do with the functioning of friendships and families, from the children's own perspectives. For example, three girls and one boy, aged between four and eight years, swallowed *neīngala* roots apparently as part of a game in which one group told lies and cheated and the other group expressed sadness over their inability to trust others. In a second case, two children—a boy and a girl aged eight and seven respectively—had been playing "families," during which father came home drunk and shouted at mother; following this the children adopted the roles of the parents' children who then swallowed *känēru* to stop the parents from fighting. Not simply reflecting a childish rendition of adults' suicidal practices, I suggest

these examples display a more creative engagement with suicide as a method of moral regulation.

Beyond the hospital and throughout my fieldwork in Madampe, I observed similar kinds of structured games and imaginative play to those I recorded in the hospitals, although ones that did not include actual self-harm. As with the hospital cases, however, they also included imagining suicide in response to their friends' or family members' moral failings, or were commentaries on the lives of older peers who fetched up in situations the younger child assumed could lead to self-harm. Importantly, too, some did not legitimize self-harm but instead made fun of or ridiculed suicidal practice through jokes that "subverted" the logics of suicide. For example, when one young man told me about his love problems, a younger boy aged 11 years began imitating the older youth's despair through a suicide routine. The boy swiped his finger across his neck, clutched it, and then fell to the floor, tongue hanging out. Although I only ever came across one such case of neck slashing in reality, the act was enough to have the other youth present doubled up in laughter. In another case, a young girl aged seven years imitated somebody taking poison because of a love problem. She ran out of the room laughing hysterically at the thought of it: "*I* would never be so silly," she said.

Extending the field of learning contexts further still, not all cases of suicide play involved experiments with suicidality but instead experiments with poisons. Thus, hospital records suggested three boys aged between six and seven years had been admitted after playing a game of "poison dare." Led by an older youth, who himself did not ingest, the trio gambled on how much they could or would dare to swallow. Jeanne Marecek (pers. comm.) reports similar games of dare with poisons from southern Sri Lanka, where boys are encouraged by peers to swallow poison, or alternatively bullied into doing the same. It is possible that through such exposure to suicide methods, a kind of "priming" for suicide takes place. By these activities, the boys' notions of risk would have been transformed and the potential of self-harm come to appear less "drastic" and thus "easier" to perform in later life. Thomas Joiner (2007) has argued that prior experiences of pain are a necessary developmental step on the path to fatal self-harm, and it is possible that children's familiarization with, and desensitization to, their lethal environments through suicide play provides an opportunity for experiencing poisons in different ways.

As indicated, in many cases it was very difficult to judge where the lines between games, play, jokes, and "real" suicidal practices might be drawn. Older children and adolescents in Madampe often talked about the urge to drink poison because of problems in their lives that younger children were exploring through play. Always said half in jest, such threats nevertheless carried the air of possibility—especially as most people knew somebody else who had recently self-harmed in circumstances that were extremely similar to those alluded. However, for most of my informants there also seemed to be nothing extraordinary about this, and in the very few cases where suicide threats made by adults did turn into suicide attempts, the threats themselves had been "misunderstood" as jokes, as an act of what Argenti-Pillen (2007) calls "obvious pretense." It was common for

the relatives of suicides to tell coroners that the victim had joked in the past about killing himself or herself, "but had never meant it." It was apparently a shock (and possibly a way of distancing culpability) if they did eventually kill themselves. The distinction between "joke threat" and "real threat" was then very fine, and it was through the constant rolling out and drawing back of suicide threats and self-harm attempts that people created spaces to generate ideas and claims of and about identity.

In Madampe, children's suicide play, games, and jokes contained an enmeshment of what Goldman (1998: xviii) has called "mimesis and mythos": imitation and creativity. Anthropological studies of children's play and games illustrate their importance in childhood socialization, learning, and development processes (James 1998; Sawyer 2002; Schwartzman 1976). Sawyer (2002: 10) argues that analysis of play allows us to obtain "a valuable perspective on agency and intersubjectivity" in children, through which they generate their own ideas of the social world. Similarly, Sutton-Smith (1977: 236) argues that play can be understood as "cognitive activity which liberates thought," during which children innovate social and moral roles. James (1998) has argued that far from being a frivolous activity, play can be understood as facilitating the articulation of power relations in children's lives: a "serious medium through which children conduct their social affairs," and "power relations … articulated, upheld, and challenged" (ibid.: 104).

To understand this in the context of suicide play, I draw from Chapin's (2010, 2014) work on Sinhala child development. Arguing the growing realization during childhood that the moral self is dependent upon the actions and approval of others, including how others' "bad" (*naraka*) behavior can reflect poorly on the self, Chapin suggests that children become increasingly concerned to "associate" with other "good" (*hoňda*) children and to demand "good" behavior in others, including siblings and parents. This requirement to surround oneself with "good" friends and relatives and to seek a change when others do not meet such expectations I also found commonly expressed in older children's and teenagers' suicidal practices in Madampe (Widger 2015a: chap. 4). Lynch's (2007) ethnography of female garment factory workers in Sri Lanka highlights the moral frames of reference defining "good" and "bad" behavior for women, whilst my own research in Madampe has charted the same for men (Widger ibid.; 2009: chap. 4). Thus for women "good" behavior is often defined by people in terms of "innocence" (*ahinsaka*), and for men in terms of "honesty" (*avanka*). These broad terms imply a range of gender-sensitive behaviors both elaborated and avoided, but in both women and men perhaps the overwhelming expectation is to "fear shame" (*läjja baya*) and avoid "desire" (*irisiyāva*).

Through her focus on children's dependence on others for their sense of moral approval, Chapin was thus concerned to test John Bowlby's theory of attachment and separation anxiety. Bowlby claimed that children universally move from an infantile stage of attachment to a mother figure to one of increasing independence during childhood (for a useful anthropological introduction to Bowlby and

attachment theory see: Stafford 2000). However, Chapin's ethnography suggests Sinhala children's development moves in the opposite direction: from a state of relative independence to one of increased dependency. In the village where Chapin worked, infants and young children were given a great deal of free reign to explore and seek care from a range of caregivers. Over time this freedom was reneged so that older children and teenagers came to depend solely upon the mother for love and support (see also Obeyesekere 1984). At the same time, moreover, children must become more conscious of and deferential to family and community expectations regarding good moral character and conduct. Chapin suggests that young children as a result have a much greater sense of themselves as autonomous agents than older children and teenagers, who come to feel increasingly constrained by their position within the household (*gē*) and wider kin network. Thus, while in Europe or North America children move from a position of high dependency and restricted agency to one of increasing autonomy and agency, in Sri Lanka children become less agentive and increasingly dependent as they age.

Back in Madampe, similar developmental trajectories were evident. Pre-pubertal children were relatively free to socialize across gender, caste, and class lines. However, once attaining puberty, girls and boys were strictly separated by their parents and certain of the more traditional or aspiring families sought to limit even friendships with lower caste or class children. Similarly, all older children came to take on duties and responsibilities aimed at protecting themselves from shame and cultivating "good" reputations, although how this played out was shaped by gender constraints. For example, boys' play tended to involve situations wherein conscious retribution of some kind was being sought, or alternatively as a game of dare or a form of playground bullying. Conversely, girls' suicide play concerned the regulation of intimate friendships and domestic relationships, and the rejection of morally unsuitable activities like involvement in love affairs. In these ways, even young children's suicide games, play, and jokes expressed popular gender assumptions concerning an "active" and "public" masculinity and "passive" and "domestic" femininity. Importantly, however, boys' and girls' behaviors nevertheless expressed suicide as an agentive act. We find in children's suicide play a dominant concern with the possibility of instigating change in someone else's behavior or viewpoint; even if this possibility was ridiculed rather than embraced. We find little expression of suicide as a predestined event, suggesting ideas of *kamma* in general, and the relationship between *kamma* and suicide in particular, appears at a later stage of concept development.

In a criticism of scholastic work that takes the English term "religion" to stand for a universal human social phenomenon, Bloch (2008) proposes a distinction between the "transactional social" and "transcendental social." For Bloch, the transcendental social includes essentialized concepts of human practice such as the names we give for particular kinds of human pairing or groups ("marriage," "family," "community," "nation" etc.). The transactional social is the material processes of those pairings and groups themselves (a specific kind of relationship between two or more people; a name given to a geographical cluster of people;

and so on). Put another way, the transactional social exists at the level of everyday variability and contingency of human sociality whilst the transcendental social exists at the level of "imagination" where sociality becomes categorized and defined in historical-traditional ways (in Andersen's (1991 [1983]) sense of "imagined communities" for example). Applying this distinction to suicide, I suggest that the everyday sociality of suicidal practice exists at the level of the transactional social, whilst the elaborated codes through which children and then adults make sense of suicide exists at the level of the transcendental social.

When involving suicide, games, play, and jokes provide mediums through which children both imitated and innovated transcendental knowledge of the transactional world. Suicide play, games, and jokes provided a forum for children to explore understandings of themselves as *moral* agents within a world susceptible to their own interventions. Children were experimenting with scenarios both of their own making and not of their own making, which could or could not, or should or should not, be engaged with through suicidal acts. Such dealings with the structures and possibilities of life and death, fate and choice, gave children a sense of themselves as people capable of shaping their own destinies. Even in young children, this involved transcendental concepts of gender and social relationships like kin relationships, and their ideal moralities such as how friends and parents ought to behave, which gave an overarching form and function to what remained understood as "chosen suicides." How these beliefs were responded to by parents and other adults is an issue to which we will now turn.

Putting Play into Practice: Navigating Fate and Choice and the Interpretation of *kamma*

Thus far, I have focused solely on children's stories and my own observations of suicide play. Yet of course, children's suicide play, games, and jokes did not exist in isolation and the ways in which parents and others responded to them rejected or reinforced understandings of suicidal agency and its possibilities and limitations. In this section, I describe the processes through which "chosen suicides" transformed into "destined suicides" through an elaboration of a transcendental suicidal of *kamma*. I do this, first, through an examination of how parents' responses to suicide play, games, and jokes shaped children's and teenagers understandings of suicide, and, second, through a deeper tracing of two case studies in which teenagers in Madampe grappled with problems of kammatic choice and destiny. Thus, my concern is to show how ideas of suicide and *kamma* emerge in dialogue with a wider instructional world located in adults' understandings of suicidal practice.

When it came to children's suicidal make-believe, parental responses were not consistent, both in terms of how play and games were treated compared with jokes, and in terms of how parents responded differently to sons and daughters. First, parents treated suicide games and play extremely seriously, but often joined in when children made suicide jokes. Although many parents did not think suicide

games and play were anything more than a foolish childhood activity, they were concerned it could result in hospitalization or worse. Thus, the parents of children who ended up in hospital after engaging in suicide play and games reacted to their behaviors in a way very similar to the parents of teenagers who "really" self-harmed. This included restricting children's movements beyond the home, limiting access to "bad" friends, and encouraging the adoption of "good" behavior. On the other hand, parents responded to suicide jokes with good humor, and even encouraged children when they made fun of suicide cases occurring in the village. Taken together, parental condemnation of suicide games and play and their encouragement of joking ridicule can be understood as a kind of pre-emptive "suicide prevention" in the sense they tried to interfere with learning processes of suicide, upset the logic of chosen suicide, and stigmatize meanings of chosen suicide in children's eyes.

Second, however, beyond their initial dismissals of suicide play and games, parents responded to young boys' and girls' acts in different ways. Girls' parents often stressed boys had coerced their daughters to swallow poison, and that girls' suicide games and play were unreflective and imitative of cases they had heard about: that their actions lacked any kind of agency. Conversely, boys' parents explained their sons' behaviors as "just something that boys do"; as the consequence of boys' natural tendencies to play rough and tumble and take risks. Therefore, whilst girls' suicide play was regarded as something that needed a quick and decisive response—usually through increased parental vigilance and restricted movements beyond the home—boys' play could simply be brushed aside with a stern reprimand. What parental responses to girls' and boys' suicide play sought to imply, then, was a total lack of conscious intent on the part of daughters, to the point where suicide was coerced by others, and a haphazard suicidality in boys, that could just as well have been an accidental injury like falling from a tree as drinking poison. In both responses, though, we find an appeal to "fate": of fate's manipulative hand in daughters, and fate's callous disregard for life in sons.

In this way, parental responses to suicide games, play, and jokes provided additional layers of meaning and significance to children's understandings. These introduced the notion that self-directed acts might not be self-directed at all, but under the control of external forces. In Madampe, two such influences are recognized to exist, the first being "society" (and related concepts like "economy" and "globalization"), and the second being *kamma*: the summative effects of good and bad deeds in past lives and this life. (Only rarely were a third possible external influence, supernatural beings, cited as a cause of suicide; also see: Marecek 1998.) Whilst social and kammatic forces were by no means considered unrelated, it is important to note that overwhelmingly it was older people, and middle class men in particular, who saw their lives as being subject to the whim of social forces, whilst children, as non-economically active agents, were assumed shielded from them (Widger 2012b). For children it was as part of their more general becoming of Buddhist people with Buddhist notions of past and future selves that linkages between suicide and ideas of destiny, or *kamma*, constituted.

I finish this section with the discussion of two case studies that illustrate the effects of elders' responses on children's understandings of chosen and destined suicide. The first case concerns Sajith, a 14-year-old boy who presented at my local hospital while I was shadowing a new doctor on the ward. Sajith had drunk kerosene after a dispute with his grandmother, with whom he was living at the time. The doctor and I interviewed Sajith about the events that led him to make an attempt on his life. Sajith began by explaining the circumstances that led to his self-harm, which concerned the breakup of his family home in the context of migration:

> When I was four years old, mother went abroad to work as a housemaid. Following this, I lived sometimes with father and other times with [my father's father and mother]. I lived with my grandparents because father could not take care of me. A few years ago father began living with another women who was not my mother and so I went to live with my grandparents. I did not want to live with father, as I felt betrayed by what he'd done and also because father's new wife would not care for me properly.

Sajith said he enjoyed staying with his grandparents when it was an impermanent arrangement. He emphasized that he had a good relationship with his grandfather, and claimed that he still did. However, after the living arrangements became permanent, Sajith said that his grandmother "became cruel." He complained his grandmother made him do all the housework and this reached a point where he wanted to self-harm:

> Grandmother treated me like a slave. She made me do all the housework and other work. Because of this, I couldn't attend school. Even if I missed school I still didn't have time to do all the work she gave to me. One day, grandmother asked me to prepare food for *dāna* [alms-giving ceremony]. I knew I would not have time to finish all the work, and would have to miss school for two days. I started to feel hot [*rasni*] and then saw a bottle of kerosene on the floor. I drank it because I wanted to make grandmother feel shame and be afraid. I want grandmother to show me love and let me attend school. I hope by drinking the kerosene she will know that I am unhappy with my life and would like to die instead of miss school.

When I asked Sajith why he thought the grandmother treated him badly, he explained that she resented taking care of him. Sajith thought that only his mother, not his grandmother, could love him properly. By his suicidal act, Sajith nevertheless hoped his grandmother would express love for him and let him return to school. Sajith later told the doctor that he did not want to go back to his grandparents' house but rather to a children's home. The doctor spoke to the boy's grandfather and he too thought it better if Sajith went to a children's home. However, when I called at the hospital to visit Sajith the following day I found he had been discharged and had returned to his grandparents' house.

In this case, I was unable also to interview the parents or grandparents, and Sajith's village was not included in my study. However, I did discuss his case with medical staff. The general impression seemed to be that Sajith's father and grandmother had each acted inappropriately and so Sajith's self-harm could be understood as the response of a neglected young boy seeking some form of improvement in his living situation. Although my informants considered Sajith's self-harm inevitable in the sense that the children of migrant women were popularly assumed to be particularly at risk of "deviant" behavior as a result of their lost "mother's love," it was described more strongly in terms of a process of relational disputes leading to an attempt at relational reorganization. In this sense, Sajith's act of self-harm was characterized as agentive, and even though Sajith had returned to his grandparents' home, medical staff concluded that the grandmother would now act more decently and perhaps the father would reconsider his own actions too.

For Sajith, a young teenage boy, elders did not frame his suicidal act as a moral digression. Of course, Sajith's home situation did for many seem to be unacceptable, but I suggest that had a young teenage girl responded similarly, the weight of public opinion would not have been so sympathetic (Widger 2012b). Older informants thus interpreted Sajith's act as a chosen and in some senses "correct" one; Sajith's act was unlikely to accrue negative *kamma*, and by self-harming he had drawn attention to an unbearable family life that ought not to be kept quiet. As I have argued elsewhere (Widger 2012b), such "suffering suicides" are considered to be the work of mature men, endowing them with social and moral properties associated with particular mental sophistication and "ease" (*sahanaya*). For Sajith, still a young boy, this categorization signaled the start of a journey towards manhood.

The second case concerns Arsha, a 15-year-old girl living at Alutwatta, who swallowed poison after quarrelling with her parents over a love affair. People in the community discussed Arsha's case widely and, a few months later, I had the opportunity to interview Arsha herself. Arsha explained how she had become involved in a love affair with an 18-year-old man called Dinesh, of whom her parents disapproved because he was unemployed, but also because Arsha was still at school and they feared the relationship would jeopardize her education. One day she had a particularly violent argument with her father, following which she swallowed poison:

> When I met Dinesh I knew he was good and after sometime we came to love. When my father told me to stop this affair, I felt suffering (*dukkha*), because I did not want to give up my love. That day [when I swallowed poison] father had come and told me that I can never speak to Dinesh again. I felt great sadness (*lokku dukkha*) about this and saw the poison so drank some … I didn't really think about it, I just did it.

In contrast to Sajith, Arsha's narrative reflects the same pattern of agentive disavowal recorded by Marecek and Senadheera (2012) in southern Sri Lanka. An act of self-harm is explained away as the culmination of events over which Arsha herself had little control, which also thus draws attention away from both her own moral misdemeanors and the family strife it led to. Yet during the same interview, Arsha also told me that she swallowed the poison because she wanted to make her father "feel afraid" (*baya*). An equally common claim amongst self-harmers in Madampe, with this statement Arsha was calling to mind a suicide of agency. How Arsha spoke of events unfolding in the months after her self-poisoning also reflected this sense of agentive intervention. Thus, it was Arsha's own decision, not her parents' demands, which led to the eventual break up of her love affair and return to "good" behavior:

> My parents were afraid for me but even that didn't change their mind! But actually after that I was kept at home for several months and I came to realize that my love for Dinesh had changed. It was a very difficult period for me but I know that it is better if I concentrate on my schoolwork so maybe I can go to university. That is what I want now, and am working hard!

Across Alutwatta more widely, Arsha's act of self-harm was mostly described in fatalistic terms. The common interpretation was that Arsha had fallen in love with an unsuitable boy and so when her parents demanded that the relationship end—as inevitably they must—Arsha swallowed poison—as inevitably she would. Villagers explained her case in terms of the logic of *kamma*, where a bad deed (a love affair) led to another bad deed (a suicide attempt) which were both reconciled through a good deed (committing to educational studies). This helped to mark Arsha as a "good girl" in the eyes of most people: although she had started a love affair and self-harmed, she had nevertheless learnt the error of her ways.

For Arsha, self-harm was rendered socially and kammatically neutral through recourse to an invocation of fate. Thus, the transformation of a transcendental social of kin morality into one of kammatic Buddhism by Arsha's parents as well as Arsha herself signaled the attainment of a suicidal maturity allowing her to switch back and forth between narratives both morally challenging and morally appropriate. In other words, Arsha had moved beyond the imitative and imaginative suicide play of her younger peers and their "peripheral" participation in communities of suicidal practice to assuming a full position within adult worlds. As much a "coming of age" as Sajith's self-harm, Arsha's self-harm finished in her "mature" decision to return to school and work for her future, obeying parents and other elders, and accepting the structures of hierarchy in which she was increasingly enmeshed. For Arsha, as for Sajith, "becoming suicidal" was a question of "becoming a person."

Conclusion

This chapter has offered one more response to the question of why people become suicidal. I have addressed this through a consideration of how Sinhala Buddhists in one small locality in western Sri Lanka become suicidal people, and thus develop an idea of themselves as people with agency within a context of suicide as something "predestined" or something "chosen." The result has been a developmental argument that suggests knowledge of chosen or agentive suicide, and at times a performative manifestation of such suicides, exists as a possibility from early childhood. The idea of suicide as a predestined act I have suggested comes at a later stage of concept development, probably only fully from early teenage, when complex understandings of Buddhist doctrines on *kamma* are acquired. Thus, developmentally, understandings of chosen suicide exist prior to understandings of destined suicide, although once the ability to imagine the destined suicide arrives, it does not displace the idea of chosen suicide but exists alongside it in constant and often creative tension (Widger 2012b).

The second theme of the chapter involved a consideration of how people *become people* through this tension. Thus, I have shown that children imitate and innovate suicidal acts through games, play, and jokes, and in doing so exist simultaneously as peripheral participants in adults' communities of suicidal practice and as full participants in their own communities of suicidal practice. Children's identities as agents are deeply tied to this, moving from a situation in which their agency is strongly pronounced into increasingly constrained positions: this is especially the case for girls and young women. While for boys and men suicidal acts that are claimed agentive do not often come with moral disapproval, for girls and women it assuredly does. This outcome is tied to how boys' suicidal practices are from an early age dismissed as playing rough and tumble and later in life as a decisive engagement with their problems. In women agentive suicide, usually framed as "anger suicide," may be performed precisely because it causes them and their relatives shame, and thus becomes all the more potent as a result.

Thus developing the ability to understand and practice suicide in morally appropriate ways forms part of the process through which children in Madampe mature and grow into adults. What at first glance would appear a particularly morbid affair is, I argue, better understood as being a process not so much about death but about life. "Suicidal children grow up" is how child suicidologist Pfeffer and her colleagues put it (Pfeffer et al. 1993): self-harm may "put the idea of death into other people's minds" (Widger 2015a) but not without also putting the idea of death's antithesis, not least questions of what comes after survival. As children live through suicide, the practice of suicide becomes the effect of a cause and the cause of its own effects, manifesting different socialities and moralities in a processual sense. It is through the suicide process that social and moral personhood is created even as it is negated, leading to new ways of living through the acquisition of agentive and non-agentive ways of dying.

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Chapter 10
Suicide, Agency and the Limits of Power[1]

Katrina Jaworski

Suicide is commonly understood as an explicitly individual choice and act (Andriessen 2006). As one definition describes: "Suicide can be defined as a deliberate taking of one's life" (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2004: 3). With some cultural exceptions, this deliberate taking takes place in private. The problem with this understanding lies in how agency is recognized in the material act of suicide. There is an assumption that the person intending to carry out the act must come before the act in order for the act to be deliberate. The ontology of suicide in this regard lies outside discourse, suspended from contexts and norms that may frame and condition the idea of a deliberate taking. But what if, as Michel Foucault claimed, "the author does not precede the works" (1984a: 118–19)? How can someone be the author of their suicide if the one who is doing the taking does not precede it? At best, does this not compound the problem of agency even further? At worst, does this not obliterate agency altogether: the key element on which the intelligibility of suicide as individual act and choice depends?

In light of these questions, I have two aims in this chapter. One is to examine the epistemological wiring of intent and agency in suicide. The second is to understand further how power shapes the material act of suicide. These aims cover three areas of analysis. First, I will examine what Foucault's contention offers towards understanding the constitution of agency in the material act of suicide. I will deploy elements of Judith Butler's work to theorize a way of thinking of suicide that furthers Foucault's contribution—namely, his take on author and authorship as a site of examining agency in suicide. I will argue that positioning suicide as relational and already part of discourse does not make the act of taking one's life any less deliberate. Secondly, I will use my argument to rewire a little the conceptual mechanics of Emile Durkheim's approach to understanding agency in suicide. I will not retheorize Durkheim's approach to suicide, as this is not my purpose. Instead, I will examine one limit in Durkheim's work to see what it offers towards understanding agency in suicide. Thirdly, I will return to Foucault

1 This chapter draws on, and continues my earlier work on, suicide and agency, published in *Social Identities*. Once again, I draw on Judith Butler's work on performativity as a methodological tool. As such, this chapter is another installment in my theorization of agency in suicide. Here, I pay more attention to how power shapes the material act of suicide. For earlier publications see: Jaworski (2003, 2010a, 2010b).

by examining whether death is power's limit, and the implications this has for understanding freedom through suicide.

My intention in this chapter is twofold. One is to rethink suicide as a verb instead of assuming that it is always a noun. If we theoretically re-render suicide as a verb, perhaps we will get closer to understanding whether we can be free when we die. The second is to push at the epistemological limits of conceptualizing suicide. This, I think, will enable us to understand how suicide—as an ontological given—depends on the context in which it becomes a social and cultural reality.

The Deliberate Act of Taking One's Life

I want to return to the definition introduced earlier, namely, suicide as "the deliberate act of taking one's life" (ABS 2004: 3). In this manner, suicide is situated as an explicitly individual act where the individual, as the author of the act, is solely responsible for the act. At the center of the act stands an individual to whom the decision to die belongs. The deliberate decision of the agent appears to be determined largely by the activities of a disembodied mind, and the absent presence of a body, which does the taking of life. The latter is not identified directly, even though it is the necessary site of activity. Yet suicide is an explicitly individual act not because a person is automatically responsible, but because they are hailed as being responsible. By having responsibility *attributed to them*, the individual is situated as the original source of the intention to suicide. At the same time, a "doing," made apparent by the taking of life that expresses an outcome, marks suicide. It is unclear what the outcome will be, other than there must be one to signify the taking. What is made clear is that the intention behind the taking must be deliberate in order to have the outcome recognized as a suicide.

For suicide to be defined as deliberate taking requires a medium. Although this particular element is not directly named, it is there for the taking of life to occur. In other words, the medium, or more specifically a body, is the reference point through which the doing of suicide can be identified. It provides a point of origin to determine the material, tangible existence of suicidal intent and outcome. Without the body, intent cannot be identified with certainty, making suicide difficult to determine (Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999). As a *site* of activity to which suicide can be attributed, or a surface yielding its material signs, the body appears to exist as neutral and self-evident. It is an inert material basis for the act of suicide, divorced from discourse and culture. As such, the suicided body does not need direct naming. Such existence can be summed up as an absent presence (Shilling 1993).

By referring to the body as an absent presence, I mean two things. First, the body is not recognized as a valid object relevant to understanding the meaning of suicide, even though the very idea of suicide depends on what lethal signs the fleshy body yields. Secondly, the body is assumed to be self-evident and obvious to the point where it is superfluous to speak of it. It becomes absent in its presence.

This absent presence is conceived via language, through which, as Foucault (2006) wrote, the body disappears because it appears as a transparent medium of activity. It disappears into function, operation and action (Bishop 2010). But this disappearance is dependent on language failing to hail the body's presence directly. This failure is not an inherent feature of language. Rather, it relates to how language is used to render suicide intelligible. Thus, I am concerned with how the body is *interpellated as absent* so that suicide becomes the property of the disembodied mind, filled with agency to do the body's deliberate taking.

What I have explained above can be framed as conditions of possibility upon which suicide is constituted conceptually. The conditions, I am suggesting, are informed by the classical liberal construction of the subject or personhood—one that is deemed as self-sufficient, autonomous, and presumably free to fulfill one's intentions (Butler 1990). Under such conditions suicide materializes as an intentional and deliberate act of death, one that denotes a wholly contained, obvious phenomenon, which can be distinguished and described. It can be argued that such conditions constitute suicide as prediscursive: as possessing its own ontology, regardless of the institutional and interpretive processes that contribute towards making sense of suicide. This is important for it frames the individual as the author of their choice to, and act of, suicide. But what if the individual is not the author?

Posing such questions comes with a risk of upsetting established and widely accepted ways of conceptualizing suicide in fields such as sociology and anthropology. The classic work of Emile Durkheim continues to be influential, and attributed to establishing suicide as a social observable fact. While Durkheim recognized suicide as a collective symptom of society, he still assumed the individual to be autonomous to choose suicide, with suicide possessing its own distinct (social) nature. As Durkheim (1897: 44) explained, "the term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result." For Durkheim, this result was not a mere sum total of independent events, but "is itself a new fact *sui generis*, with its own unity, individuality and consequently its own nature—a nature, furthermore, dominantly social" (Durkheim 1897: 46, original emphasis). In this sense, suicide depends on the individual in order to become social. Durkheim (1987) presumed individual authorship is entirely individual even if influenced by social conditions. But what if individual authorship depends on something else other than the individual? More importantly, how can a focus on authorship be a site of examining agency in suicide?

Author and Authorship as a Site of Examining Agency in Suicide

For Foucault, the individuality of the author is questionable. Foucault's concern was with the relationship between text and author, and in particular how the former situates the latter as an antecedent. Rather than claiming that authorship

has disappeared, Foucault suggested that authors as individual writers—those who hold a priori status—have disappeared. Instead, what is left of the author is a name that serves to represent modes of being via particular practices that "systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1997a: 49). Thus, the author's name projects the individual as a coherent source of expression to neutralize the normative yet contradictory workings of power relations in such a way that their workings remain foiled. In this sense, authors are never located outside discourse. If they are prediscursive, then this is only "if one admits that this prediscursive is still discursive, that is, that they do not specify a thought, or a consciousness, or a group of representations" (Foucault 1997a: 76). This does not do away with authorship, but instead reframes how we ought to think of it in order to be more aware of the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault 1997a).

To graft Foucault's line of thought to suicide, it would seem that the individual is less likely to be the sole author of their death. With this lack of authorship, it seems that the willfulness to take one's life deliberately is in doubt, since the individual as the source of expressing the act is missing in action so to speak. If a "taking" is taking place in the act, then this taking does not belong to the individual and, presumably, the act of death is not theirs, nor the agency required to enable the deliberateness behind the act. To settle for this resolve, however, would be a mistake, since Foucault's position can offer more to understanding the constitution of agency in the material act of suicide. To get there, I want to draw on elements of Butler's work on performative and performativity, as it enables a more nuanced reading of suicide, through which it is possible to gain insight into the macro discursive mechanics of Foucault's contribution to understanding the author and authorship, and thereby agency in suicide.

Butler's Theoretical Approach to Performativity

In her work on sex and gender, Butler (1990: 25) re-articulated Nietzsche's view that there is no doer behind expressed deeds, as the doer and the deeds are constituted by expressions themselves, rather than the doer being the original source constituting the expressions. In this sense, gender as performative is "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance" of sex as the natural and original source of expressing gender rather than being a discursive effect like gender (Butler 1990: 33). According to Butler, the very idea of gender taking on meaning occurs under the cultural compulsion to take on meaning, constituted by practices governed by social and cultural hetero norms (Butler 1987, 1988, 1990, 2004a). If one is compelled to take on gender, then it is impossible to theorize the body without meaningful references to cultural meanings, since corporeal bodily material acts make sense through discursive means (Butler 1990). Thus, the body is "cultural and material at once" (Butler 2004a: 87).

Butler (1993) built on this position later by contending that performativity is a reiterative and citational practice through which discourses of sex and gender produce the effects they name. Gender is repeated and ritualized through actions that precede, constrain and exceed the doer, whether it is through particular bodily gestures, speaking, or being hailed by bodies and actions of others (Butler 1993, 1997a). The trick of power is to make the doer and the deed look like the deed belongs to the doer as the sole author of the deed. This "trick," or effect of power, shows that discourse has a history that precedes and conditions our actions. This becomes apparent in the way we articulate, and speak of, our actions. What is important about understanding conditioning in such terms is that it has the capacity to change norms in the course of their reiteration and citation. This means that the very discursive "apparatus … [that] seeks to install the norms also works to undermine that very installation" (Butler 2004a: 42). The challenge is to work out exactly how the discursive apparatus undermines itself in the course of installing itself. I will not consider this here other than to suggest that such knowledge compels me to take on Foucault's (1997) task and identify suicide's conditions of intelligibility so that I can track the limits and breaking points to see what they offer towards rethinking suicide as a verb. With this in mind, I now want to turn to heuristically working through the idea of suicide as a performative act.

Reading Suicide as Performative

Suicide can be read as performative in that it can be seen as a "doing." Suicide has a performative representation—a set of repeated bodily acts. These produce the effect of the individual being the author of taking their own life—being deliberate in and through the taking. To draw heavily on Butler, suicide is constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results. Across the surfaces of the suicided body suicide is produced and rendered visible by rituals that condition the deliberateness in the taking of one's life. For the sake of clarity, I will situate these as a set of interrelated imagined "movie stills," bearing in mind that these may or may not lead to particular outcomes. The taking of life by someone might consist of: a) thinking about suicide, b) imagining possible outcomes, c) writing a note, d) gaining access to specific means to do it, e) estimating what might be lethal, or perhaps what is a culturally and socially "appropriate" method, f) planning the location of the act, g) performing the actual act, for example pulling the trigger or swallowing the pills, and h) awaiting the loss of consciousness unless it has already happened, providing no-one has intervened. In other words, suicide materializes on the basis of these particular rituals and corporeal gestures that bring into existence the taking of one's life. These gestures are bodily acts, already part of the activities of the mind, even if they appear disengaged from the mind.

Curiously, suicide as performative is dependent on material objects. Guns or pills, as some examples, are the means or methods through which suicide is performed. Yet these methods are material *objects* as much as they are *methods* of

suicide. We could not understand the material act of suicide without understanding methods as objects, or *material instruments* that are part of inscribing suicide *on* and *through* the corporeal body. My point is that objects are part of constituting suicide as performative. Objects are part of generating repeated bodily acts; they mold the meaning of corporeal gestures. This suggests that the mind of the individual is engaged with its intentions. This suggestion is acceptable providing we admit that the body is entangled with the intention to take one's own life, and thereby with the ontology of suicide.

Yet suicide as performative does not rest with the individual alone. Whether someone lives or dies, different bodies of knowledge and their discursive sites of practice such as coronial inquest findings, medical autopsy reports and/or psychiatric assessments become part of interpreting whether the outcome is a suicide and, in particular, whether the individual was deliberate in their intentions. From another perspective, is the individual capable of taking their own life without prior knowledge of something called "suicide"—knowledge that in turn is shaped by experts, individual experiences and society at large? It is clear, for instance, that something other than the individual taking their life already exists. If this was not the case, then patterns of suicide, be it in relation to gender, age, race/ethnicity, sexuality, class or suicide methods, could not be documented (ABS 2004), or understood at a macro level as Durkheim (1951/1897) argued more than a century ago. In this sense, suicide can be read as a reiterative and citational practice, made possible through norms, meanings, assumptions and knowledges identified within existing historical conditions and patterns, through which something about the act can be hailed and understood as a deliberate taking of one's life.

Hailing suicide as a deliberate taking of one's life is not only ever outside modes of knowing and investigating suicide, but also operations of power through which effects are generated. This, I am arguing, depends on Butler's (1997) re-interpretation of Althusser's (1971) linguistic notion of interpellation. Butler (1997) argued that performativity as citational reiterates and cites meanings through which subject positions are conferred. For Butler, "the act of recognition becomes an act of constitution: the address animates the subject into existence" (Butler 1997: 25). For this to happen, a subject must recognize the position to which it is called. This can be difficult in completed suicides because the dead are not in a habit of responding literally. Nevertheless, suicide is still hailed because as Butler (1997: 12) argued, interpellation requires authority in its address, "a venue of power by which its performative effects might be materialized," enabled by history, contexts, knowledges and conventions, which name suicide. Contexts in particular are generated by wider social and cultural understandings of suicide as in the case of gender (Jaworski 2010a). Power lies not only in the moment of articulating meaning about suicide, but also in the context through which suicide is made sense of, based on extant knowledge of what the material act of suicide involves and the extent to which it is intentional.

What then might we say of agency? If much of what constitutes the act resides outside the act, then how can the deliberate taking exist? The issue here,

however, is not about attempting to disavow the presence of agency in the act of suicide. Instead, my point is to say that agency has a layered history on which the deliberateness in the taking depends. What constitutes one's authorship is dependent on something other than the individual without the act ceasing to belong to the individual's choice to kill themselves. As Butler explained: "Our acts are not self-generated, but conditioned. We are at once acted upon and acting, and our 'responsibility' lies in the juncture between the two" (2004c: 16). This is what makes deliberateness, authorship and "sole" responsibility possible. One can take one's life, and be deliberate about it, precisely because such a taking is shaped by repetitive conditions and prior takings, re-articulated when the taking occurs. Butler (2004a: 32) suggested that we come into the world on the condition that the social world is there, which means that we cannot be ourselves without being preceded and exceeded by something other than ourselves. To follow on, we cannot depart from this world, or at least try to, without something paving the way for the deliberate taking to take place—which for some leads to death. In this sense, it is possible to read suicide as relational—as never being outside discourse without undermining the individual as the author of the act, or making the act of taking one's life any less deliberate. In so doing, it might enable thinking about *what* conditions the deliberate in the taking, and the taking itself, *who* and *what* is part of the process of interpretation, and *whose interests do the interpretations serve*.[2]

Given my earlier emphasis on objects as part of theorizing suicide as performative, I want to return to this to explain further suicide as relational. Drawing on guns as one example, Latour (1999) argued that objects too have agency, by which he means they are part of agency.[3] A person cannot kill another without a gun. Nor can a gun alone kill a person. The killing is enabled by the relationship between the two, in the situation and context in which it occurs. Latour argued that agencies "are always presented in an account as *doing* something, transforming some As into Bs through trails with Cs" (2005: 52–3, original emphasis). So if we consider suicide through Latour's lens, the doing of the taking of one's life can be read as transforming some people (A) into suicides (B) through trails with the methods such as guns (C). Therefore, agency for the action lies in the relation between A, B and C. The person uses a gun to do the taking of their life, but the gun also does the taking because the person interacts or uses the gun.

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2 My argument raises the question of whether there are possibilities for slippages, disruption and subversion in the citational nature of suicide. I consider this in greater depth in earlier publications, which focuses on gendered disruptions in the production of suicide as a masculinist discourse (Jaworski 2010a, 2014). Lack of space here prevents me from elaborating any further. However, I wish to thank Jocelyn Chua in particular for raising this important issue in my work.

3 I would like to thank Ludek Broz and Ben Sellar for drawing my attention to Bruno Latour's arguments about objects and agency, and directing me to relevant works, and patiently explaining the ontology of objects to initially a very perplexed yet intensely curious listener.

While the point about objects might be obvious, it is difficult to understand it in suicide because action and agency are attributed to humans as sovereign sources of intentions, and somehow these intentions are not seen as affected by objects. As Latour explained: "If action is limited a priori to what 'intentional,' 'meaningful' humans do, it is hard to see how a hammer, a basket, a door closer, a cat, a rug, a mug, a list or a tag could act." Understanding the agency of objects is difficult because, as Latour continued to explain, they are deemed to exist "in the domain of 'material' 'causal' relations, but not in the 'reflexive' 'symbolic' domain of social relations …" (2005: 71). Yet suicide as social cannot be understood without objects that affect the particularities of suicide as performance. This is something that undermines Emile Durkheim's theorization of suicide as social—to which I turn next.

Durkheim's Approach to Understanding Agency in Suicide

Emile Durkheim's sociological theorization of suicide did not directly focus on intent or agency. In *Suicide*, Durkheim's contention was that suicide is a social fact, one that is observable and therefore recognizable. For Durkheim, intent fails to substantiate suicide as observable because "it is too intimate a thing to be more than approximately interpreted by another" (1897: 43). Intent is the property of the individual even if, as Durkheim argued, the individual is never outside the social (1897: 46). Suicide must have "an easily recognizable feature" (Durkheim 1897: 44). This feature is recognized through statistics, which Durkheim regarded as expressions of collective social afflictions (Durkheim 1897: 51). Numbers embody expressions of suicide as social.

I have a problem with Durkheim's understanding of suicide as a recognizable fact. In making the assumption that suicide can be recognized through numbers, Durkheim assumed that suicide must have its own ontology. This is despite the fact that suicide is the product of collective ideas, social currents and struggles. In this sense, ontology is collapsed into capacity, with functioning acting as a point of reference (Butler 2000). Recognized through suicidal outcomes—which for Durkheim referred to completed suicides only—capacity establishes the social ontology of suicide. This, however, is not entirely clear because Durkheim was dependent on society to frame and recognize the social uniqueness of suicide. At the same time, the individual occupies a space external to society since the causes that lead to egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic suicide are themselves external (Lehmann 1993, 1994). Thus, the ontology of suicide is dependent not only on the individual capacity to take one's life but also on the fact that the causes themselves are external.

What I see as a limit and a problem offers an opportunity to rethink agency in suicide. This begins with Durkheim's recognition of suicide as performance. In discussing individual forms of the four social types of suicide, Durkheim wrote: "There are really very different varieties of suicides, and these differences appear

in the way suicide is performed. Acts and agents may thus be classified in a certain number of species; these species also correspond in essential traits with the types of suicide" (1897: 287, my emphasis). A few pages later Durkheim (1897: 291) made a connection between performance and methods of suicide. He emphasized that there is no connection between suicide and "the most common methods of performance," identified as strangulation and hanging, drowning, firearms, jumping, poisoning and asphyxiation (1897: 291). For Durkheim, the "form of death chosen by the suicide is therefore something entirely foreign to the very nature of suicide. Intimately related as these two elements of a single act seem, they are actually independent of each other" (1897: 293).

I want to argue that, while methods of suicide bear no (statistical) relationship to suicide as social, the two cannot be ontologically independent. Suicide has to be carried out by particular means to understand it ultimately as a social outcome. Put differently, how can you have a performance without the performance being constituted by and through something that shapes that performance? My point is that the ontology of suicide is informed by what the performance of the act hails. This does not mean that suicide is a matter of performing something. Rather, suicide is bound to the way particular methods shape it as a social outcome, enabled rather than disabled by the body. Thus, Durkheim's contradiction reveals suicide as performative.

This contradiction is sustained via Durkheim's reliance on the Cartesian mind–body split to situate his view of what it means to be human. He wrote: "civilization can be fixed in the organism only through the most general foundations on which it rests. The more elevated it is, the more, consequently, it is free of the body." For Durkheim, the social is literally superimposed on the body (Durkheim 1893: 346). Transcending the material conditions of the body is what enables the social to materialize (Gane 1983; Witz and Marshall 2004). Rationality enables this transcendence because "what characterizes the morality of organized societies … is that there is something more human, therefore more rational, about them" (Durkheim 1893: 407). Thus, the social constitutes what it means to be human, enabled by the capacity to transcend the natural body, aided by the rational abstract mind. This, I think, explains why for Durkheim suicide was the property of the disembodied mind, and why it belonged to the realm of the social unlike the material, biological body. Transcending the material conditions of the body is a necessary ingredient to theorizing suicide as social.

Regardless of how Durkheim's conceptual contradiction is sustained, it still tells us that the taking of one's life is dependent on the body as much as the mind. Against Durkheim's intentions, suicide as social is in fact corporeal—something Durkheim attributed to women's yet not men's suicides. I will not dissect Durkheim's approach to gender, as I do this elsewhere (Jaworski 2014). Rather, I want to suggest that Durkheim's limit offers an entry point into rethinking how suicide is constituted through what Butler called a bodily ontology through which "the 'being' of the body to which this ontology is given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations … make possible the body's persisting

and flourishing" (2009: 2–3). So if we are to increase our understanding of the ontology of suicide, we need to draw on faulty premises precisely so that we can rework them into something different. In this way, we may recognize agency as social as much as individual, and the body as generative rather than inert matter through which the taking of life materializes.

Are We Free in Suicide?

Questions about agency invariably raise questions about power and freedom. Suicide can be framed as an act of empowering oneself even though those who die do not live long enough to know what this freedom means. I want to address power and freedom in suicide by turning to Foucault's view of death and power. Foucault argued that "death is power's limit, the *moment* that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence" (1978: 138, original emphasis). Elsewhere, Foucault described this as man's "invisible truth, his visible secret" (Foucault 1973: 172).

Foucault's understanding of suicide explains further his claims about death. He saw suicide as something that testifies to "the individual and private right to die, at the borders and the interstices of power that was exercised over life" (1978: 139). This is important, because as Foucault explained, suicide marked "one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power has assigned itself the task of administering life" (1978: 139). Death made visible the *moment* in which the body, as a site of discipline and regulation, limited power's capacity to manage life.

The notion of moment is important. Death seems to be an end point, a marker of finitude, or the last movement in what Foucault called "movements of existence" or "art of living" (Foucault 2001: 85, 86). Death is a moment of transformation, a "sudden … event which drastically changes and transforms the subject's mode of being at a single stroke" (Foucault 2001: 211). Freedom is possible because it occurs within rather than outside contexts of existence, in which a subject is able to contemplate what it means for them to be in relation to themselves and others. The individual becomes "ready to die" through contemplation (Foucault 2001: 265). For Foucault (1978, 2001), this readiness is the private rebellion against the workings of sovereign power. Strangely, this relates a little to Durkheim's (1897) conceptualization of egoistic suicide, where the individual is not integrated enough into society due to excessive individualism (although *how* one becomes excessively individual is unclear). To use a metaphor, someone turns on their heels, tells life and society to get lost (politely speaking) and walks away from it all, presumably free.

It is tempting to assume that old age marks a readiness to die. This, however, does not have to be the case. For Foucault, what made someone ready to die was based on *how* one has lived their life, and whether this *how*—a mode of being in the world—made them feel satisfied with who and what they have been. This is best demonstrated through Foucault's view of suicide, which he saw as "not a way

of cancelling the world or myself," but rather a moment of potential authenticity, or a way of "rediscovering the original moment in which I make myself world" (cited in Miller 1993: 351). This moment is a moment of liberation. "[T]here is not a piece of conduct more beautiful," Foucault wrote, "more worthy of careful thought than suicide. One should work on one's suicide throughout one's life" (cited in Miller 1993: 351). In a Heideggerian (1996) sense, the reality of death must be acknowledged and embraced by the living to achieve an authentic existence (Afary and Anderson 2005).[4]

Butler (1996) disagreed with Foucault's claim about death and power. She argued that "in the maintenance of death and of the dying, power is still at work and that death is and has its own discursive industry" (Butler 1996: 71). In relation to suicide, death is not power's limit, since norms, meanings and assumptions, and the processes that are part of making sense of suicide, will constitute knowledge of suicide before, during and after the act of taking one's life. Unlike Foucault, Butler did not see context as freeing, even if it enables our capacity to act. The fact that we can understand suicide as an explicitly individual choice and act indicates that there is what can be referred to as an "afterlife of words" (Butler 2005: 29)—an afterlife that precedes and exceeds individual deaths and their authors. Dead or alive, it may not be possible to be free of operations of power, as a result of the effects of such operations. Whether we like it or not, truths about our lives will be produced, and in death this production, be it true or false, is truly out of our hands.

Foucault's (1978) utopian belief in technology as a means of preserving life is at the heart of Butler's (1996) disagreement.[5] Addressing this in the context of epidemics, Butler argued that Foucault's view "fails to account for the way in which technology is differentially deployed to save some lives and to condemn others" (1996: 71). Foucault's (1978) stance does not take into consideration that "the regulatory discourse on sex could itself produce death," especially in relation to the AIDS epidemic (Butler 1996: 72). Thus, Butler's (1996) argument draws attention to the fact that tactics of power are deployed to decide that some lives are valuable, and thereby worth saving from the start. It also draws attention to the question of what counts as a life. More recently, Butler (2009: 1) wrote: "the 'being' of life is itself constituted through selective means; as a result, we cannot

4 It is tempting to conclude that Foucault advocated suicide (he did not and nor do I). Foucault's statement, as I understand it, is more nuanced and profound. In some ways, suicide is beside the point. Instead, suicide is about resisting that which is enforced as an "exterior" truth about one's self at the price of disavowing something more "interior," even when this interior is already part of the exterior. In the concluding pages of the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault wrote, "Must I suppose that in my discourse I can have no survival? And that in speaking I am not banishing my death, but actually establishing it; or rather that I am abolishing all interiority in that exterior that is so indifferent to my life, and so neutral, that it makes no distinction between my life and my death?" (1997b: 210).

5 In her disagreement, Butler acknowledged that Foucault's untimely death from AIDS-related complications means that he "could not know the historical future that arrived to defeat his claim" (Butler 1996: 71).

refer to this 'being' outside the operations of power." While Foucault did not see life outside of power, death, I think, is positioned precisely as an act and moment that escapes power.

So is it ever possible to be completely free through suicide? One might argue that we are free in death, and especially when we choose it, because it matters little how we are hailed posthumously, since we are not alive to care. But posthumous hailings might be a problem when they misrepresent the one who died. So perhaps the issue here is freedom from representation rather than phenomenological freedom. If freedom in a phenomenological sense is the issue, then Foucault is right even if the moment that hails freedom remains a secret. If freedom from representation is the issue, then Butler is right. Thus, we need to work out what sort of freedom we are addressing before we can answer whether death limits power.

Turning Towards Freedom in Suicide

I want to return to what Foucault meant by *movement* as a way of grappling with what kind of freedom needs addressing to work out whether death limits power. As described earlier, contemplation is the basis of Foucault's understanding of freedom through death. Foucault explained that contemplation "is not a movement by which we turn away from this world to look elsewhere" (2001: 265). Rather, contemplation as an act of turning enables us to "grasp the world here as a whole, without ever losing sight of this world here, or of ourselves within it" (2001: 282). The act of suicide can be seen as some kind of "turning." One turns against oneself to kill oneself in order to turn towards freedom. This turning, I am arguing, needs to be considered as performative. In light of my earlier discussion, I do not need to explain this further other than to say that the turning is constituted in doing the taking of one's life. This, however, does not explain the moment of turning, which I now want to address.

In response to the earlier critiques of her work on performativity, Butler (1995) argued that her work reformulates rather than dismisses agency. Addressing this in relation to language, Butler explained that

> when words engage actions or constitute themselves a kind of action, they do this not because they reflect the power of an individual's will or intention, but because they draw upon and reengage conventions which have gained their power precisely through a *sedimented iterability*. The category of "intention," indeed, the notion of "the doer" will have its place, but this place will no longer be "behind" the deed as its enabling source. (1995: 134, original emphasis)

Sedimented iterability is one way of understanding agency in suicide. It is one way of understanding how we are preceded and exceeded by the past in the present, which makes the idea of turning against oneself possible. While methods of suicide are not the only aspects of understanding suicide, they still inscribe the turning,

which I want to situate as the *moment when* the material act of taking one's life takes place. This, I think, situates suicide as a temporal act. Suicide as a relational act depends on its relationship with time. This may come across as obvious. My argument, however, is that time is part of the materiality of the act not simply because the act materialized *in* time, but because norms and assumptions animate the authorship of the act *through* time. Suicide as a verb can only be understood in the past tense—a tense that stands in our way of working out whether we are free in suicide, even if the moment of suicide *might*, for some, signify freedom.

Death-Bound Subjects

How we think about the constitution of the subject and subjectivity is another reason why it is difficult to understand freedom in suicide. This, I think, is not simply because death is impossible for the subject to experience, or to share with another for that matter (Agamben 2002). Rather, it is the way neo-liberalism influences the idea of who and what we are, through which we come to understand ourselves as free and autonomous. This is a deeply cultural assumption, one that presumes that we must be free if we are literally alive. But what if, for some, being alive signifies their lack of freedom? What if agency comes with death instead of life? Abdul JanMohamed addressed this kind of question by arguing that some subjects are "formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" (2005: 2). JanMohamed referred to this as the death-bound subject, constituted by the deployment of death and terror (2005: 6–11). The threat of death penetrates the capillaries of their subjective structure to the point where their life signifies social death. The context of JanMohamed's study is Richard Wright's account of the numerous lynchings of African Americans in the southern states of early twentieth-century America.[6]

I do not have the space to discuss JanMohamed's (2005) fascinating study in detail. Nevertheless, it is worth saying that recognition plays an important part in JanMohamed's (2005) explanations of agency in death. In analyzing a character called Bigger in Wright's fiction, JanMohamed stated that "it is the recognition (and the embracing) of death that eventually becomes the precondition of his freedom" (2005: 88). This of course is a paradox, yet one that works for Bigger whose life has been condemned to the perpetual state of social death. Actual death becomes a source of freedom, because he is able to interpret his motives and intentions through which death signifies freedom from living in a racist white society. For JanMohamed, this "affirms his agency precisely in dismissing the contingency of events" (2005: 99). Once Bigger accepts his actual death and sees himself as already dead, this "permits him the sense of freedom" (JanMohamed 2005: 103). In this sense, freedom is enabled through reflexivity

6 Janne Flora's discussion of the *qivittoq* in Greenland in this volume has conceptual affinities with JanMohamed's approach to the notion of the death-bound subject.

and critical self-awareness. Bigger is able to assess the meaning and implications of his life—a *secret* that cannot be taken away from him (JanMohamed 2005). This, I think, extends Foucault's (1978) point about death being the most secret aspect of existence. It sheds light on the fact that *how* power works can alter even though it never ceases to work. And so power cannot colonize his death-bound subjectivity *entirely*.

Four implications arise from JanMohamed's (2005) analysis of the death-bound subject. First, it showcases that agency in death is affective, rather than the discursive outcome of effect alone. By this I mean agency in death is shaped by the body's way or potential for preparing itself for action (Massumi 2002). In this sense, action can never be though outside the potential for action. Secondly, it situates agency as not bound to action alone, which for JanMohamed is "inadequately defined with existentialist phenomenology as always being conscious and deliberate" (2005: 105). Thirdly, it showcases freedom as abstract potentiality. Symbolically, one can be "reborn into a new life even in the minimal sense that this new life consists 'merely' of the recognition of life as an infinite positive potentiality" (JanMohamed 2005: 119). Fourthly, it suggests that self-awareness can, to some degree, negate death. One's ability to critically reflect on one's subject formation is truly at stake. We can still have space to know who and what we are even if the right to be is not ours from the beginning. Pulled together, these implications point towards considering the idea of death as agentic.

Before considering what JanMohamed's analysis can offer towards understanding suicide, I want to discuss his point about reflexivity and self-awareness, because it has specific implications for how we can understand freedom in suicide. JanMohamed defined "the turning of the subject on himself [sic]" as "a reflexivity that is fundamental to this subject's differentiation of his old self from the new one" (2005: 67). This differentiation, or self-awareness, does not originate from the self alone, but from others such as family members and friends in Wright's fiction. For Butler (1997b), the turning of the subject, especially on itself, is the basis on which the subject is produced. Butler suggested that in "a Nietzschean sense, the subject is formed by a will that turns back upon itself," which means that the subject becomes the "modality of power that turns on itself; the subject is the effect of power in recoil" (1997b: 6).

JanMohamed drew directly on Butler's (1997b) points to suggest that Wright overcame his racial and political formation by "submitting that very formation to a systematic deconstructive, destructive scrutiny and that his affirmation of himself consisted precisely on negating the negation inherent in his own formation" (JanMohamed 2005: 288). JanMohamed's explanation, I think, extends Foucault's point about contemplation. It further emphasizes Butler's point about subject formation. JanMohamed showed that it is not possible to be a subject without power, because one's formation as a subject is dependent on power. In this sense, I want to suggest that death is not about escaping the grasp of power. Rather, we need to use power—we need to be entangled in its web—to be free. I also want to suggest that perhaps death too is the effect of power in recoil. When hearing

the news of a suicide, we recoil in horror and shock by saying: *how can this be?* While so much more is part of this statement, my point is this: death as power's recoil is not a negation of power but instead of its effects. So what does this offer us towards rethinking agency in suicide?

If we take up JanMohamed's (2005) contribution, we must admit that actions alone cannot determine agency, even though we depend on the subject's actions to make sense of suicide. Therefore, we need to understand agency as affective—as a potential which furnishes how we understand agency.[7] We need to seriously consider suicide as abstract potentiality, so that we might understand who and what someone is or was *through* the act of suicide rather than *because* of it. By saying this, I am not advocating suicide as a means of gaining freedom. Rather, I am advocating a more nuanced understanding of agency. This understanding needs to wrestle with existential phenomenological understandings. It needs to be critical of causal explanations that refuse to acknowledge *socio-cultural context as an epistemological and ontological grounding* for understanding the agency *of* suicide. This, I think, will be productive towards conceptualizing suicide as agency.

But there is something else. JanMohamed wrote:

> The withdrawal and desire are also existential in that the very *desire* for death ironically affirms the subjectivity as well as the agency of the person who wishes to abandon both. Actual-death is an absolute termination of consciousness and, hence, a negation of subjectivity and agency; however, a *desire* for actual-death cannot be such a termination. (2005: 121, original emphasis)

JanMohamed's (2005) attention to desire is important for it showcases that, for some, their desire for suicide could be freeing precisely because it affirms who and what they are in what might feel like complete disavowal of their subjectivities. This might not only be in relation to suffering from mental illness, but also in circumstances where political suicides are ways of affirming freedom and life when neither are givens.[8] If we pay attention to desire, then it might enable us to understand that subjectivity in suicide is already relational and not singular, because who and what a person is in the act of suicide is informed by something other than themselves.[9] Our freedom in death is somewhere between others, the objects and us.

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7 See for instance Jocelyn Chua's chapter in this collection to understand the role of affect and emotions in suicide.

8 Deen Sharp and Natalia Linos offer a cogent analysis of freedom and life in dying in this collection. I want to thank Deen Sharp in particular for teasing out with me the notion of the absent present body during the *Suicide and Agency Workshop* at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology during November 2011.

9 Ludek Broz's chapter in this collection demonstrates this point succinctly via his analysis of the soul-double.

Theorizing Agency in Suicide in the Future—Concluding Remarks

I want to conclude by making a series of suggestions. Some of them are tentative, others less so. In theorizing agency, we need to focus more on the value of death as agency—something Paul Gilroy (1993) examined in the context of slavery. This focus, I think, cannot settle on life-as-agency as opposed to death-as-agency, and instead must work out how agency lies in an interstitial zone between the two. We also need to reconsider whether the question of agency in suicide is in fact Eurocentric and masculinist in so far as it assumes a white male heterosexual subject as the only one capable of *truly* exercising agency (Jaworski 2010a, 2014). While Foucault's (2001) attention to contemplation and reflexivity is valuable, perhaps some of us can meditate on whether we are free only because our freedom is a given, and our agency never rendered opaque, undermined or taken away. Thus, we need to address conceptually and analytically what gives suicide its own ontology, and importantly, whose interests such ontology serves.

But there is more. At this point, I am convinced we need to take up Butler's (2009) call for a bodily ontology, based on ethics that hail who and what we are in relation to ourselves and to others. Part of this is the recognition that understanding death is done by the living and not the dead. Another part is us recognizing that "we are acted upon and acting, and our 'responsibility' lies in the juncture between the two" (Butler 2002: 187). The taking of one's life does not make anyone less responsible for their actions. This responsibility, however, materializes from more than one reference point.

Finally, the notion of relationality needs more attention in the study of suicide and suicidal behavior. Relationality does not simply mean one thing is related to another. Instead, as Butler argued, "relationality sutures the rupture in the relation we seek to describe" (2004a: 19). And so, as I understand it, suicide can be conceived of as a rupture in how we understand life, and the suture is constituted by our attempts to understand it through which suicide can be viewed as a verb rather than a noun only. This requires a constant focus on the iterable process through which our understanding of suicide materializes. In this way, we will be able to understand more what frames agency in suicide, and whether suicide limits power. Except of course this understanding might not suit the world views of the living and, as such, it will need to be articulated respectfully, honoring the grief of those who are left behind. So perhaps what is at stake is in fact *temporality* and its relationship to how actions are perceived.

My suggestions point towards the need to reframe the way we theorize agency in suicide. This reframing needs to consider questions of representation and phenomenology equally, even if death as death from a phenomenological perspective is impossible to know and understand. We need to consider how conditions of possibility frame agency: how we do the "framing" and how it determines what questions can be asked and how they can be answered. For now, it is important to acknowledge that something about suicide remains out of reach since the material act tends to take place in private. And so there may be a limit to

the way power operates: a threshold enfolded by what is said and known of suicide and, importantly, what remains unsaid and silenced. To borrow from Agamben (1998), it might be useful to consider the possibility of a zone of indistinction: an interstitial threshold where meanings of life and death pass into each other for the purpose of rendering someone free. And so it is necessary to question agency in suicide not as a means of doing away with it, but rather to find out what the limits are, and what those limits actually offer us as we continue to debate the ontology of suicide. Maybe then, as Foucault would have it, knowledge can become "a means of surviving by understanding" (1988: 7).

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PART IV
Afterword

Chapter 11
Afterword: Taking Relationality to Extremes

Marilyn Strathern

At one point in their Introduction to this excellent volume, the editors say that for all the achievements of the anthropology of suicide, it has "failed" to resolve certain tensions inherent in Western approaches. They conclude that "resolving the tension is pointless"—an anthropological focus is better trained on how it plays out in various contexts, including anthropologists' own analyses. Having located the tension thus, they borrow some of its components and use them as an explicit means to open up an unusually wide field of enquiry. The categories of discernment are not rejected; rather, they are creatively applied to fresh ends of exposition. This thoughtful weaving together of Western traditions of thinking and the material presented in the chapters that follow should be read for the innovation that it is.

The tension in question is traced from a radical divergence in the territory of suicide studies that itself deals with Western preoccupations about the individuality of persons. There is no need to repeat it here, except to say that the psychiatric ("psy knowledge") and the sociological dance together: in this kind of thinking, the other side of the Western "individual" is invariably "society." So social factors easily slide into place as the complement of individual intention. This is where Durkheim began of course. (And the whole doctrine of suicide exceptionality—so well laid to rest in this volume—is part of that antinomy.) These essays both put that particular divergence (individual and society) to one side, and keep the tension in how one might understand agency and suicide subjectivities. Indeed, the tension lies in the very ascription of agency, in the roles being accorded to the suicidal subject and to other entities or powers. These may or may not be thought of as individuals. By shifting the ground this way, the editors and their contributors free up new possibilities for an anthropological approach to the whole topic of suicide.[1]

The Fields of Suicide

That what comes brilliantly into view are many issues that fall outside other kinds of study is partly a result of the particular social formations that have given many of these chapters their impetus. Importantly, those formations include the expert knowledges and official representations of suicide that help create the conditions

1 In what follows, I refer to chapters by their authors.

under which self-harm occurs. The performative dimension of such acts is never far from the fore in these accounts, stimulated by the analytical conclusion that one dimension of what holds the topic together is the prevalence of what look like protest (resistance) or accusation in explanations of the suicidal act. Protest and accusation are not the same, and the authors treat the concept of protest with some caution (see Münster). "Resistance" has the potential of transforming the grounds for protest, as when an occupied body is imagined as freed from occupation, though in the case described here we discover that body is much more potently thought of as land and, with that, its disposal entails something other than simple resistance (Sharp and Linos). The term might be more applicable to the person isolated by his (her?) anger who puts himself beyond the causes of it, knowing his name will—by contrast with those irreversibly isolated—re-enter the human world (Flora).

What is also brought to the fore is that accusation inevitably implicates agents other than the person who aims to (tries to) kill him or herself. The agents can be people, often closely related (Widger; Staples), or non-human manifestations of misfortune (Reyes-Foster, Broz), or more diffusely conceived social conditions (Münster). Reference to suicide may thus be part of the coinage of self-sacrifice between those who should care for one another (Chua); it may lead to a community examining itself for having fallen into misfortune (Reyes-Foster), or to a community feeling victimized by the death (Broz). Reflection on social conditions is not restricted to Western invocations of society; in these examples, suicide opens up space for ethical judgements about ways of life, including the kind of responsibility that the suicidé bears (Münster). Conversely it may be routine in people's thinking habits—what looks like an act of last resort becomes an act of first resort—when they find themselves in suicide-near circumstances, creating expectations to the extent that children's play includes suicidal roles (Widger). Suicide has its environments and discourses, then, and there is nothing axiomatic about its positive or negative effects. Taking seriously the tension of agency expands the horizons of what may count as suicide fields.

Dispatching the Author

If suicide were Durkheim's marker for pointing out the social constraints on what is regarded in the European vernacular as a supremely "individualistic" act, it is because enacting individualism finds its place in social theory too. The central issue is how suicidés come to be perceived as the authors of their own acts (Jaworski). What we—readers of this book—continue to call "suicide" is the way in which an actor deploys his or her own life or body to give it a future effect that, in excluding others, denies the possibility of any other futures. Another way of phrasing the tension of agency is to ask to what extent that body or life was at the disposal of the one who disposed of it, that is, was ever "his" or "hers."

If under the guidance of the editors we contemplate the "turn to the person" in anthropological analysis, a turn that opens up enquiry to a particular kind of

relational discourse, we can without contradiction observe that persons only act as individuals under some circumstances. We may extend that to saying that persons only act as intentional and causal agents under some circumstances too, although the presumption that they should is the default position for Western cosmologies. This generates many of the questions that run through this book: What if there is no author before the act (Jaworski), no case history before the case (Münster and Broz)? Who is the "self" in self-detachment (Flora)? What continuity does the entity that appears the subject of self-harm have over time, that is, suppose discontinuous entities (different persons) are involved (Widger; Staples)? And, more generally, which or who are the agents of harm? These essays each in their own way ask what kind of person is created through suicide.

For all that the discourse of suicide may become quotidian, it is in its future effects a discourse about an extreme act. A possible way of phrasing a divergence in the social ecologies ("niches," Staples) to which the volume points is to ask what gets taken to extreme. For many Western peoples, the "problem" with suicide is that it is interpreted as a supremely individual act, and remains so however much social factors bear down on it. One of the analytical problems lying in wait for the ethnographer working outside this vernacular (and the vernacular has its own outside, as evinced in the criticisms Jaworski advances) is that the language of analysis has to contrive ways of expression that do not fall into the trap of assuming that everything one might wish to say about the relational nexus in which persons act is simply another version of "the social." How, for example, to articulate the sense that, for some of the people described here (e.g. by Flora; Reyes-Foster; Broz; Chua), suicide would seem to take *relationality* to an extreme? Apart from observing that it is not the same kind of relationality being summoned across all these cases, and that it may be in various tensions with notions of individuality, the analytic lies in danger of collapsing under the weight of the provincial Western contrast between individual : society. It is worth, once more, defining the danger.

At least in English, the terms "individuals" and "persons" are interchangeable in the vernacular, and "social" life may be understood as "relational," so it seems as though we have simply reinvented the dichotomy all over again.[2] In the spirit of the volume, let me borrow the dichotomy to dispatch it. Western "individuals" are caught up in relational networks, some of which they can do something about, others less so, and cultivate them to various degrees. Yet these relations do not make *of the individual* a "relational person." For conceptually speaking the individual is the person in a detached state; it performs the person as though human life could be imagined as apart from its relational nexus. Psychiatric and sociological arguments go on being made precisely because, however much one demonstrates that there is no human life that exists in isolation, no self that is

2 If this were so, then committing suicide for "relational" reasons would be ontologically indistinguishable from Durkheim's "altruistic" mode. However, Durkheim's altruistic mode, along with his other categories, was devised to explain the actions of an individual subject (and how the individual deals with social life).

not a reflection of other selves, no relative that is not in turn a relative, these realizations do not—outside of the enigma of kinship—furnish a self-contained discourse. They do not provide general discourse with a self-evident language to compel action or reflection. Rather, such factors tend to be understood as facets of interpersonal relations, or of selves that are "psychologically" open to influence from others, or of "social" relationships in general, all of which, as argued in this book, may be presented as external to the individual. In short, a person imagined as an individual has an "individual's" kinds of relations.

This discourse forecloses other possibilities for thinking about persons, Western or otherwise, and particularly when agency is elided with individuality. Yet if an individual has an "individual's" kinds of relations, then relational "persons" have their own kind of relations, and *pari passu* their own kind individuality. We can lay the dichotomy (treating person and relation as a version of individual and society) to rest at this point. An important question that springs out of the chapters is what kind of, and what varieties of, agency is to be found in the relational nexus in which persons flourish. Indeed, rather than starting with the individual's relations we may instead ask what social agents are composed of (Broz).

Agency in Relationality: A Concluding Instance

It would not be out of sympathy with the ethnographies presented here to mention an investigation from the Papua New Guinea Highlands. It fits the criterion of identifying a "suicide field," although such a field would never provide statistics for suicide rates; it engages with general discourse on the subject, including the reflections of actors on their circumstances; finally, it reveals elements of both protest and accusation, and of power relations. It also answers, for this part of the world, the question of the kind of agency that resides in relationality. Obviously we cannot proceed without some understanding of the character or contours that relations are seen to take, and that requires concrete (however generalizable) demonstration. This limits the account, insofar as it does indeed belong to a very specific part of the world. However the account shares with several of the other chapters the assumption [the formulation is mine] that to imagine the person as though it were (only) composed of the kinds of relations that sustain the vernacular Western perception of the individual would be at best incoherent. In the following configuration from the Papua New Guinea Highlands, with its gendered transformations of wealth and well-being, the issue is the relational person's (kinds of) relations.[3]

At its most succinct, imagine that every person is conduit of relations with others. Whereas the body has a privileged place in Western notions of individuality

3 And its correlative kind of individuality. At least, to follow Wagnerian anthropology in Melanesia, individuality is an achievement of acts of differentiation and the particularity of events against a taken for granted relational background (Wagner 1975).

(the taken for granted absent presence, Jaworski), other kinds of bodies mobilize other entities or qualities (e.g. Broz; Sharp and Linos), and in the Highlands it is its divisibility or distribution that has a privileged place. One body makes evident the state of other bodies. Indeed, self-harm is better rendered body-harm, where all bodies are registers of health and relational state. In terms of interactions between people, body-harm damages those who take care of it or through it express their own state of being. The greater the expectations others have of one another's bodies—as vehicles of clan strength, of fertility, of drawing-in wealth—the more poignant the damage to it. Bodies in a constant state of transformation point to the transformation of relations. Thus are bodies attacked in warfare, consumed by witchcraft, or disfigured at funeral ceremonies; they are nurtured through food from people's hands, decorated by those close to them, and celebrated for the fertility they bring to so many. Where, then, is the agency in this?

We may describe the agent as a pivot of transformation, taking the action that shows the relations newly configured by that act (however repetitive such an iteration might seem to an outsider). Highlanders would largely concur that the "mind" or intentions of persons to act in certain ways is implied in the presentation of people's bodies to one another, whether supportive or destructive. To kill or maim another is to damage that person's transformational capacities for others or even remove that body from the matrix of corporeal relations. No more can the person act as a conduit: channels of interaction are severed, and the survivors have to overcome the damage done to them. Just as relations do not stay put but undergo constant transformation, so a conduit is not an inert vehicle—it is agentive, the person [as I would put it] who acts with others in mind. A sense of commitment and willingness to act is part of the life of bodies and minds alike. The mind and its emotions and intentions—its capacity to show sympathy and empathy—is thus a crucial aspect of the bodily orientation people display towards one another. Close kin, parents and children, and especially spouses, are permeable to one another's states.[4] The corollary is that body-destruction is a common response to situations where people feel they have lost the empathy of others; regardless of who is at fault, that loss will have negative consequences, and the suicidé shows others the dire effects of *their* actions. It is the "same" as destroying others by destroying what they (should) value—the very reverse of devaluation (Chua). Now a body is not only distributed among those related to one another but evident in all manner of enterprises, including the crops men and women grow. A man might cut down his own tall-standing bananas in rage. Women too may be auto-destructive, destroying crops or lopping off their own fingers.

This last example comes from what on the face of it seems another arena of interaction altogether. I refer to an account of the Highlands Huli by Wardlow (2006); while it was published in 2006, with respect to these specific issues (and

4 I adopt Wardlow's (2006: 74) terminology for Huli, see immediately below. The other side of growth and nurture is destruction and ill-being, and it is appropriate to talk of destruction in this context.

the remark is confined to these issues) it could as well have been published in 1976, or 1966 for that matter.[5] Her focus is women who refuse to settle down and bear children for those who would benefit, thereby and crucially "throwing away bridewealth" (2006: 76–7), that is, their transformational potential to turn wealth into children and children into wealth. "Wayward women" get reputations for being sexually promiscuous.

How does the ethnographer analyze it? It turns out that women in this situation are invariably provoked and they act in protest and in a spirit of revenge. Adopting the phrase "negative agency" for a women's refusal to do what women should do, Wardlow (2006: 15) points out that a so-called wayward woman "severs from the social group that which should most be encompassed by it—her sexuality." (Through such encompassment the social group in question is augmented.) Her protest may be articulated in terms accusatory of the greed or disregard of others (in effect, one might add, *their* "wayward" behavior towards her). She takes away not only the reproductive energy lodged within her body[6] but her "mind" too, namely its purposefulness in relation to others. Catching local idioms, Wardlow refers to wayward women as cutting themselves off, amputating themselves (2006: 15). This is not taking to extreme the kind of Western individuality whose life purportedly flourishes through (its notionally primeval) detachment from relations with others. This is a detachment from life conceived of (visualized, acted upon) as flowing through the bodies of those connected to one another, such that each senses others as part of itself; it is also a detachment from potential sources of support, a negative partibility (2006: 170). In this it takes the ramifications of a relational field to its extreme. For, quite specifically, a "wayward" woman destroys the capacities within her that have been made by others and are part of them too. She harms those who are also her. In short, such detachment involves the "withdrawal of bodily capacities from relationality" (2006: 171).

And what does Wardlow tell us of how Huli women in this situation, and those around them, analyze it? The answer is made doubly interesting by the material in this volume, and the reader will no doubt have guessed it. Women draw an

5 In 1966 Marie Reay, a pioneer of Highlands ethnography in the 1950s, was beginning to record countless ways in which Kuma women presented the ever present threat of turning into "wayward women" through the huge expectations their male kin had of clan and interpersonal alliances to which women's marriages were crucial. Not published during Reay's life time, the dramaturgical stories that resulted have been edited by Francesca Merlan (submitted to ANU e-Press). However it should be added at once that there is more to Wardlow's narrative than mentioned here, especially with respect to one of the sources of desperation of modern wayward women, who sense they are becoming "socially" "owned" in a commodity sense (e.g. 2006: 16, 22).

6 "[This] is not a 'thing' possessed by her [or by anyone] … Rather, [it is] an energy or potency created by her family and clan"; a woman who uses her sexuality in extramarital liaisons has allowed "a theft of clan potency and potential clan wealth … [for] the cooperation of women in their role as embodied wealth, embodied clan potency, and transacted person is indispensable to Huli social reproduction" (Wardlow 2006: 15–16).

explicit parallel between seeking paid sex and committing suicide: a refrain heard many times was "I was so angry that I wanted to kill myself, but instead I went and [slept] around" (2006: 170).[7] It is not only in (a woman's) drawing attention to the singularity or uniqueness of herself as a conduit, through which so much could have flowed for so many, that the withdrawal of bodily capacity is an individuating moment. It is an act (she has herself) taken. Far from denying or obliterating existing relations, they remain [in my terminology] the cause; the agent of the action transforms them into an acutely negative state. The suicidé is momentarily created as an individual thereby, relationality's kind of individual; "wayward women" live by that kind of moment.

This description of so-called wayward women in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, and they are not restricted to Huli, serves to underline one of the important messages of the present book. Being open to suicide as a "cultural production" (Münster), often mobilizing fields of action apparently concerned with other matters, is not just to appreciate the place of suicide in social life but the dimensions of social life it in turn illuminates.

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7 Needless to say Huli suicide, much more likely among women than men who have many avenues to redress, has its own dynamics, rationales and expectations (see Wardlow's detailed account, 2006: 75–8).

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